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TALKING OF MURDER

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BY

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CHAPTER I

IF there was one thing in life that Michael Connolly valued it was respectability—on the surface, at any rate. Beginning as a latent instinct handed down to him on his mother's side of the family, it had popped up at intervals in his not uneventful career and tided him over many difficult situations. For that reason alone he had married, and was never tired of saying, particularly in his wife's hearing, that it was the most sensible thing he had ever done.

To her, and the early influence of his mother, he owed the fact that at forty-five he was a sound commercial success, and a citizen of whom any industrial centre less extensive than London might have been proud. It had not always been so. At home in the Green Isle, to which he had not returned for so long he had lost count of the years, he had been known variously as "Big Michael," "One-eyed Mike," and "Michael the Madman." But all that was past and almost forgotten. His father had met a lively end, his mother a peaceful one, and only his wife and a few intimate friends now used his Christian name. To others he was Mr Connolly, or more formally, on bills and less unpleasant correspondence, M. Connolly, Esq. The latter pleased him greatly.

Doubtless early associates would have found difficulty in recognizing him. His stature and bearing were the same—tall, broad, muscular, with a hint of aggression beneath outward courtesy in times of trouble. His curly dark hair, touched here and there with grey, was carefully oiled into submission, and his face, once smooth and carefree, wore the weary expression of one who habitually keeps late hours. Only the fact of his missing eye might have identified him. He said he had lost it in a fight, and no one had any reason to disbelieve the statement. Indeed, he spoke of losing an eye as casually as if it had been a button. And, strangely, the disfiguration lent a certain dignity and romance to his appearance, particularly where women were concerned, a fact which his wife had often observed, not without comment. But Michael never

took advantage of his opportunities. He had become too respectable for frivolous conduct, and, in any case, he had no time.

His whole life revolved around the club in Soho Square, which, opened some years previously, had grown from a minor place of amusement to one of the most fashionable of its time. Occupying the ground floor of an austere, three-storeyed building, it catered for dinner, alcoholic refreshment, and dancing until 2 A.M. Governed by his passion for respectability, Michael had at first accepted only members whose antecedents were unquestionable, but later, owing to his wife's practical arguments and a confused idea that wealth must be synonymous with stability, he had welcomed all who, introduced in the orthodox fashion, proved sufficiently moneyed to afford the cost of membership.

Connolly's Club had always been expensive, exclusive, and comprehensive, and of recent years it had become very popular among those who are attracted by such qualities. It boasted two bands, one playing normal English music for those who wished to dance in the normal English way, and another, which put in an appearance after midnight, for the benefit of the younger, smarter, more dashing set, who preferred their own versions of the rumba and other dances culled from North and South America. Not that dancing ever became really unrestrained at Connolly's. Michael was too careful of the club's reputation to allow anything that might invite disapproval from the majority of its members. Just occasionally outsiders, perhaps under the influence of alcohol, would try to force an entrance, but these were dealt with in summary fashion. A heavy door, inlet with a steel grille, blocked the main entrance, and identity had to be firmly established before entry could be gained.

In view of all this care and circumspection, the incident that occurred on the eve of the new year 1939 was regarded by Michael as nothing short of a major disaster. It had promised to be such a successful evening, too—one of the best the club had ever known. Attendance was above average, every table taken and packed with happy people, consuming excellent food and drink, dancing, chatting, laughing, and generally relaxing. The cloakrooms were filled to overflowing with

heavy overcoats, expensive fur capes, and coats and wraps of every description, for outside it was snowing in a delightfully seasonable way.

Michael, ensconced in a padded chair in his cosily furnished, centrally heated office, a large brandy-and-soda in front of him, was a very contented man. It was early yet. Towards midnight his wife would arrive, and as the clock struck the hour they would join a selected group of guests and pledge each other's health for the coming year. There would be streamers and balloons and much spontaneous gaiety. Michael loved New Year's Eve with a passionate intensity, for it was one of the few occasions when he could be naïvely sentimental without making himself conspicuous.

Everything was comparatively quiet at the moment. There penetrated from the main room a low hum of voices against a background of gentle waltz rhythm, but the guests had not yet warmed to the occasion sufficiently to throw off natural reticence. Michael's office was situated to the left of the entrance-hall, but was hidden from view by the black velvet curtains which draped the walls, giving an atmosphere of comfort and luxury. The thickly carpeted hall took one direct to the guest-room, but left and right were arched passages leading to the ladies' cloakroom, the cellars, and the kitchen quarters. There was also a side-entrance to the building, but that was used only by those wishing to gain access to the other floors, two of which were let as offices and the third converted into a modern flat and occupied by Michael and his wife.

The gentlemen's cloakroom, snobbishly indicated by a swinging sign reading "Messieurs," was directly opposite Michael's office, and whoever presided over the hats and coats and other articles deposited there also acted as doorman. Usually it was the worthy Mr Siegman, a hard-working man of middle age and nondescript appearance, with a pessimistic disposition that could see no good in anything. To-night, on account of extra visitors, he was assisted by Ramon, a Spanish boy who had come to Connolly's to learn all he could of club and restaurant life. But the rush was temporarily over, and they could afford to sit back and take things quietly. Presently

there would be drinks on the house to celebrate the arrival of the New Year, and perhaps, Ramon thought, even Mr Siegman's sour countenance might thaw a little. Surrounded by outdoor apparel, all neatly labelled and hung ready for the owners, the boy leant against the counter and lit a cigarette, the pungency of which brought Siegman from the interior, frowning his disapproval. He said, without preamble, "Put that out. It's a bad habit at any time for a boy of your age, and it doesn't look business-like."

"No one will see," Ramon protested, drawing in the smoke with ostentatious pleasure. "They are all inside enjoying themselves. It is New Year's Eve, Mr Siegman, a time when every one should enjoy themselves."

He spoke English well, with just a slight accent that fell pleasantly on the ear. But his present hearer was unsympathetic, drawing down his thin mouth in an expression of deep distaste.

"No reason to take advantage. Can't think why you want to smoke. I didn't when I was your age. Now, either put it out or make yourself scarce. Some one's coming."

With a shrug of one shoulder, as if to indicate doubt that this cantankerous individual had ever been young, Ramon strolled away. Along the softly lighted hall, his footsteps deadened by the carpet, a man was approaching, a tallish man of about fifty, in evening dress, a lighted cigar in one hand. He moved in leisurely fashion, and his flushed face indicated complete satisfaction with the dinner he had just consumed. He paused, fumbled in one pocket, and produced a crumpled ticket, which he smilingly placed upon the counter.

"Leaving already, sir?" Siegman asked, apparently refusing to believe the obvious. His voice was naturally harsh, but assumed a deferential note when dealing with patrons. He had been at Connolly's long enough to be on terms of respectful familiarity with its members.

"Have to, I'm afraid. I only looked in on the chance of seeing Mr Tilbury. He hasn't 'phoned again, I suppose?"

"No, sir. Not again." Siegman had been busy searching among the rows of almost identical coats, but now emerged triumphant and piled a heap of belongings upon the counter.

"There we are, sir. Hat, coat, umbrella, and one parcel."

With the swiftness of long practice he came round and proceeded to assist the man into his coat. At that moment the door-bell rang.

"Ramon," Siegman called, "see who that is, will you?"

Crushing out his cigarette, the Spanish boy emerged and, sauntering to the door, pushed open the grille and peered out. A man's face, illuminated by the light outside, looked into his, a face pale and agitated, the forehead running with sweat despite the coldness of the night. A voice, thick and strained and speaking with difficulty, said, "My name's Tilbury. Open this damned door before I break it down!"

In alarm, for such an occurrence had never previously fallen to his lot, Ramon slammed to the grille and turned hurriedly to seek the advice of the more experienced Siegman, who, in the act of pocketing a tip, was unaware that anything unusual had taken place.

"It's a Mr Tilbury," Ramon said. "And he seems to be a little—well, just a little. . . ." He was loth to draw the obvious conclusion.

But Siegman was still fussing round the departing guest. He said, "Thank you, sir. Thank you very much. I'll 'phone for a taxi, sir."

"No, don't bother for a moment. If that's Tilbury I'll wait and have a word with him."

But Siegman had already gone, and Ramon was left floundering helplessly, wondering if he should enlist the aid of Mr Connolly himself. The bell was ringing again. The man standing by the cloakroom stared at him in surprise.

"Well, let him in, boy," he said. "What are you waiting for?"

With sudden resolution, mentally consigning the whole affair to the devil, Ramon moved to unfasten the catch and flung the door wide. A draught of cold air swept like a tornado into the artificial warmth, and with it came a man of middle age and heavy build, hatless, his greying hair in wild disorder. The figure of the man by the cloakroom was suddenly tense.

"Tilbury! What on earth's the matter, man?"

Ramon had closed the door and stood leaning against it,

watching apprehensively. The man who had just entered *was swaying on his feet, his mouth opening soundlessly, as if he had lost the power of speech.* Then, muttering something incomprehensible, he staggered and fell face downward upon the carpet. The other man leapt forward, dropped to his knees, and said, "Here, help me turn him over."

But Ramon had gone completely to pieces. Wildly he rushed across to Michael's office, flung open the door without knocking, and charged in.

"Mr Connolly! Quickly, quickly! There's a man . . ."

But then his carefully learned English deserted him, and he broke into a flood of Spanish idiom, illustrated with many sweeping gestures that would have explained the whole thing perfectly if only Michael had been an accomplished linguist. But Michael was not. He too was of excitable temperament, and though in the habit of speaking normal English, he would lapse into a semblance of his native tongue if anything seriously upset him, and at such times only his mother, long since departed, could have interpreted his remarks. Within the space of a few minutes, therefore, they were locked in a hopeless combat of words, from which nothing clear emerged except Michael's righteous indignation and the complete inability of Ramon to cope with emergency. Michael was the first to recover. He gulped down the remains of his brandy, and, glaring ferociously out of his one eye, demanded, "And what in hell d'ye mean by barging in on me like this, you young . . .?"

The epithet was not complimentary. Ramon had reached the stage where he could only point to the open door, and, realizing at last that something untoward was afoot, Michael rose and strode out, still grumbling. In the hall he paused, emitted another violent ejaculation, and plunged once more into an orgy of questioning. Tilbury still lay unconscious upon the ground, and the man who stood over him turned at Michael's approach.

"Good evening, Mr Connolly." His manner was perfectly calm. "A spot of trouble here, I'm afraid. Poor old Tilbury seems to be a bit under the weather."

"Drunk!" Michael breathed the word with all the sancti-

moniousness of a man who never allows himself to take more than enough. *That anyone should have the audacity to arrive at his club in such a state was bad enough. But that they should have gained entrance was incomprehensible.* He spun round upon Ramon, hovering unhappily in the back-ground.

"Where's every one?" he demanded. "Where's Sling? Where's Siegman? What d'you think you're all here for? Because you look good?"

Ramon, recalled to a sense of responsibility, hastened to make amends.

"I am truly sorry, Mr Connolly, but I did not know he was drunk. And this gentleman——"

"Mr Cunningham?"

"Yes, Mr Cunningham. He said he wanted to speak to this other one, and would I please let him in?"

"That's right, old man," Cunningham agreed. "Very sorry to have caused so much bother, but how was I to know he was in that state? He doesn't seem to be coming round, either."

Siegman had just reappeared, and approached almost at a run, meeting Michael's wrathful look with a deprecating smile on his thin face.

"What seems to be the trouble, sir?" he asked.

It was too much. Michael's temper blazed forth again while he indicated the man on the ground and described in brief but lurid detail the circumstances of his presence there. Siegman shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other, making a nervous, coughing sound in his throat.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, when he could make himself heard. "I didn't see the gentleman arrive. I was getting a taxi for Mr Cunningham. It's waiting now, sir, at the door."

"I'd better be getting along, then," the latter said. "I haven't too much time. Poor old Tilbury. He'll know all about it in the morning. Cheerio, Mr Connolly. Happy New Year!"

He picked up his belongings and walked to the door, and Ramon, anxious to make up for earlier inefficiency, moved quickly to let him out. Michael had calmed down a little.

"Here," he said. "Give me a hand, Siegman. We'd better get him into the office. Can't have people lying around all over the place."

It was the one thought uppermost in his mind at the moment. The possibility of one or several of his cherished guests emerging to view this scene of disorder was filling him with cold horror. True, it was New Year's Eve, a time when a little laxity might be allowed, but not to this extent, and certainly not on his hallowed premises. If people wanted to drink themselves into oblivion, let them do it elsewhere. The jealously guarded reputation of Connolly's must remain intact.

Carefully, for he was no light weight, they lifted the silent figure of Tilbury, carried him into the office, and laid him upon the settee. His eyes were still closed; his face had a ghastly greyish look about it. Sweating with exertion and inner misgiving, Michael straightened himself and stared coldly at his employees.

"You'd better get back to work," he said. "And if there's any more trouble at the door, call me. The only way to get anything done round here is to deal with it myself. And, Ramon, find Mr Fitzroberts and tell him I want to see him. He's around somewhere."

"He went out, sir, about half an hour ago."

"He went out? What the blazes for?"

"I don't know, sir. One does not question him."

"Oh, one doesn't, doesn't one? Well, find him."

But the injunction was unnecessary. A man had appeared in the doorway, and stood leaning there, surveying the occupants in mild astonishment. He was young, about twenty-six or so, but the leanness of his face and the jagged scar that marred his forehead above the left eyebrow made him appear, at first glance, slightly older. Of medium height, there was about his thick-set figure an air of toughness ill-suited to evening dress, and his shock of dark hair looked as if it had never heard of civilization. He asked, without any particular interest, "What's going on, Mike?"

Siegman and his young subordinate had already discreetly withdrawn. Michael said, "Come in and shut that door, Sling. Where in hell have you been all this time?"

"Out for a drink. Why?"

"Blind O'Riley! You went *out* for a drink? We're bunged up to the eyes here with drink, and you have to go out."

"I fancied one at the local," Sling said, unperturbed, and, hands in pockets, strolled across and stood looking down at the unconscious man on the settee. "How did he get here?"

"Look," Michael said, following, "I'm a patient, easy-going sort of man. I don't overwork anyone, and I don't often lose my temper. But one thing riles me, and that's to find I'm surrounded by a lot of incompetent idiots. I take five minutes' rest and quiet, and what happens? *What happens*, I ask you? You all go off and leave that half-witted boy in charge. And the next thing I know he's in here gibbering like a lunatic and Tilbury is lying out there, three sheets in the wind, looking like Saturday night on the Old Kent Road."

He paused for breath and ran a hand over his heated brow. But the younger man appeared not to be listening. He had been making a closer inspection of the fallen Tilbury, and when he glanced up again his deep-set dark eyes had lost their expression of amused tolerance. He said, "This man's not drunk. He's dying. We'd better get an ambulance," and moved quickly to the telephone.

"Eh?" Michael stared at him, unable immediately to absorb this new complication. Then mechanically he too bent to regard with greater care the man he had unjustly accused of self-indulgence. "Are you sure?"

"I may be an incompetent idiot," Sling said, "but I know a dying man when I see one."

He was having trouble with the telephone. Three times he dialled, and then gave vent to a mild expletive. Michael said, coming across to him, "Here, not so fast. Can't we get a doctor? How's it going to look, stretchers and bodies being carried about on New Year's Eve?"

"You don't want him to die here, do you?"

"No. . . . No, I suppose not. Oh, perish my soul, why couldn't he go somewhere else to die?"

"For a Catholic, Michael, you're showing a remarkable lack of feeling," Sling said. "Hallo, operator, I've been dialling ambulance for the last five minutes."

He was through at last, replaced the receiver, and lighted a cigarette.

"What do we do now?" Michael asked.

"We wait. And while we're waiting we'll have a bang-up all round just to keep us from getting morbid, and you can tell me the whole story."

Technically Michael was the boss at Connolly's, but since the advent of Sling some six months ago his authority had been usurped in so insidious a way that he was hardly aware of it. Indeed, he would have been indignant had anyone even suggested how much he had come to rely upon the judgment of young Fitzroberts, whom he had originally encountered at a race-meeting, and to whom he had taken an instant liking. Exactly where he had come from or who his people might be, Michael neither knew nor cared. The young man appeared to be well educated, both in the narrow and wide sense of the term, although his diction was interspersed with odd phrases picked up on various of his travels, which seemed to have been considerable. But there was something about his personality, his singular independence on doubtful means, his obvious ability to take care of himself, that appealed to Michael.

His wife shared his opinion. As secretary of the club she was accustomed to use her own discretion regarding its members. She claimed descent from the peerage in an indeterminate way, and from the height of her lofty connexions could look down upon lesser people, even though her more practical self accepted them for their money. But Fitzroberts went one better than that. Not only did he know, by sight at least, the regular and desirable patrons of London's leading clubs; he could also point out those who for one reason or another were undesirable. That, in the opinion of the Connollys, was an asset indeed. So he had been enrolled as right-hand man and general liaison officer, and they had so far found no reason to regret the appointment. As to where he had acquired so much knowledge he was somewhat vague. He admitted modestly that he had moved around, and they gathered that he had never been too fussy regarding the character of his associates. He had, in fact, at the time Michael

met him, been acting as secretary and general chucker-out at a club where the company was notorious for its unreliable behaviour—hence his descriptive nickname. Michael, sentimentally recalling his own turbulent youth, saw nothing untoward in that, although he preferred to forget about it.

Obediently he now reached for the brandy bottle, poured two stiff measures, and pushed one glass across the table. He drained his own at one tilt, trying not to glance in the direction of the settee. He said, "I've told you all I know. You were out, and Siegman was 'phoning for a taxi. Cunningham—you know him, tall, beefy-looking specimen—was waiting in the hall. The bell rang, I suppose, and Ramon opened the door. He said Cunningham told him to, but he's probably lying. Next thing I know Tilbury is lying flat out, and no one—*no one*, mark you—attempting to do anything about it, except me."

"All right, all right. Don't go off the rails again. I'm just wondering how he got that cosh on the head?"

"Who?"

"Tilbury. Didn't you notice it? Not enough to brain him, but he must have been out for quite a while, I should say."

"Why should I notice it? I thought he was tight. He probably was tight, and that's how he got it."

"He doesn't drink. At least, not to my knowledge. I've seen him at the bar pretty often, but never swigging anything stronger than tomato juice."

"That kind are sometimes the worst of the lot," Michael said darkly. "Who is he, anyway?"

"You ought to know—he's been a member for two years. Runs an antique shop in Mayfair. Married, no children, oodles of boodle."

Sling rose and reached for the brandy bottle.

"Hey!" Michael said. "Steady with that, boy. It's my special old-fashioned."

Sling waved aside his protesting hand and refilled the glasses.

"Just another crafty one," he said, "and I'll be off to see this thing through. Otherwise Old Woman Siegman will go all jittery and hang the stretcher up in the cloakroom when it

arrives." He tossed back his drink and regretfully replaced the glass upon the table. He said, looking towards Tilbury, "Poor devil. I wonder if some one hit him, and if so, why?"

Michael stared in horror and leapt to his feet.

"Glory be to God! You don't think . . .? Now see here, Sling. You'll go along and put everything right, won't you? We don't want any publicity. I'd go myself, but it wouldn't be decent on New Year's Eve—now, would it?"

The front door-bell was ringing. Sling said, "That's them, now. I'll get them to go round the side-entrance. And, Mike, you'd better nip along and see that no one leaves for the next ten minutes."

"Thanks, boy. I'll do that." Mopping his forehead, Michael was half-way out of the door already. "And remember, no publicity, for God's sake. Think you can manage?"

"Compared to some things I've done," Sling said, "it'll be pie."

Outside in the hall Ramon was standing uncertainly, while Siegman, on his way to the door, paused at sight of them.

"Oh, there you are, Mr Fitzroberts. I was just going. . . ."

"All right," the latter said, "I'll take over."

Michael, still agitated, went quickly along the corridor and stood in the entrance of the room where guests dined and danced in happy unawareness. At any other time it would have appeared to him a pleasant spectacle. The room was large and tastefully decorated, the lighting discreet in its diffusion. White-clothed tables contrasted with thick black carpet to the edge of the highly polished dance-floor. Immaculate waiters, smoothly efficient, hurried, without appearing to do so, from the crowded tables to the door at the far end marked "Service," and if beyond that door they let the mask slip and became incoherent maniacs shouting orders unintelligible to the outsider, the diners were fortunately unconscious of it. Michael, eyeing with less enthusiasm than usual the decorations in honour of the New Year, yet had to admit that they were a success. It needed but fifteen minutes to midnight, and the band, looking extraordinarily convivial beneath the illuminated words "Happy New Year, 1939,"

was playing a waltz so deliciously sentimental as to move the hearts of the most hardy.

But for Michael the evening was already a failure. He stood there, surveying the scene, lost in melancholy, until he became aware of the head waiter, bowing stiffly, saying, "Good evening, sir. Your party has arrived."

"Eh? Oh, yes, of course. I'll be with them in a minute. I'm waiting for my wife."

It was as good an excuse as any, and would allow him a brief breathing-space. The evening's unpleasant incident had thoroughly upset him, and Sling's suggestion of premeditated violence had done nothing to lessen inner disquiet. The waiter permitted himself a formal smile.

"Mrs Connolly is here too, sir. At the table."

Michael was surprised. He had never before known his wife to be early for anything. Prompt, yes, but not early. She considered it beneath her dignity to arrive too soon. And why hadn't she given him a call? Perhaps it was as well she had overlooked it, in the circumstances. Still, it was very odd. He looked at his watch. The muffled sounds behind him had ceased now, and a cautious glance over his shoulder assured him that everything had returned to normal. There was nothing he could do but start the celebrations and hope that Sling would not be too long away. This suspense was awful. He said to the waiter, "Thanks, I didn't know that," and made his way over to the table reserved for the occasion, nodding and smiling in an absent way to those who greeted him *en route*. His wife was in company with five people—three men and two women—four of whom he knew well—the Honourable Jean McAllister, a close friend of Mrs Connolly, and her fiancé, Robert Clissold, and Mr and Mrs Patrick Casey. The odd man was a stranger to him, and he glanced questioningly at his wife as she made the necessary introduction.

"Señor Vasquez—my husband, Michael Connolly."

The man rose to his not very great height. Slender, dark of skin, with eyes of extraordinary lustre, he smiled, bowed, and shook hands, and Michael was aware of a strong feeling of resentment. Where had Lilian found him, and, having found him, for what reason had she invited him to their table,

on this night of all others? They were surrounded by people they knew and liked, and she must ask a complete stranger to share their evening. It was most unreasonable and quite unlike her. He said something appropriate all round, and took the chair next his wife, continuing to regard her with some curiosity as he poured himself a drink.

Some ten years younger than her husband, Lilian Connolly was a tall, dark, graceful woman, with a composure arresting in contrast to his mobility. She wore to-night a special smile, that of the combined hostess and perfect wife. Abandoning for the moment the light-hearted chatter in which she had been indulging with her guests, she turned to Michael, laying a modestly ringed hand on his arm. There was a note of restraint in every detail of her toilet, yet always she contrived to be distinguished in company.

"Where is Mr Fitzroberts, dear?" she asked. "I thought he would be joining us to-night?"

Michael, lacking her facial control, looked just as uncomfortable as he felt. He said evasively, "He slipped out for a while. I expect he'll be in later."

The last thing he wanted was an inquiry into Sling's movements with these other people listening, particularly the little dark man. Unconsciously he had returned his attention to the latter, and Vasquez, as if in answer to his thoughts, said, "I trust you do not mind, Mr Connolly, my accepting your wife's kind invitation to join you? As it happens I was expecting to meet some one here, a Mr Tilbury, but so far he has not arrived."

Michael, glass to lips, gulped and swallowed hastily. He said, with an effort, "Is that so?" And, as an afterthought, "Know him well?"

"No, not at all. But I understood he would be here from my good friend Mr Cunningham."

"Cunningham? I saw him leaving over half an hour ago."

"That is so. He could not wait any longer."

Michael was silent, cautiously weighing the situation. This man might or might not know something. In any case, it would not do to tell him. Time enough when he knew which

way things were going to develop. Charminglly gracious, Mrs Connolly said, "Señor Vasquez is from South America, Michael. He doesn't know many people in London."

He was relieved from the necessity of replying by a roll of drums from the band as a clock struck midnight. With a confused medley of sounds the company was rising, the band was playing *Auld Lang Syne*, people were crossing arms, clasping hands, singing. In a subtle way the whole atmosphere of the place changed in an instant. Conventionality had gone, and for one night in the year Connolly's Club had assumed an air of unrestricted gaiety. Only the proprietor was unable to get into the spirit of it. As his wife raised her glass to him, smiling with unaccustomed sentiment, he did the same, but his thoughts were absent.

People were dancing now, crowded shoulder to shoulder, catching at balloons and getting tangled in streamers as they floated down from above. Paper hats and whistles and coloured travesties of hunting horns had magically appeared. The drink flowed and the music played. Every one seemed very happy. Every one, that is, except Michael, who in his mental vision could see a still form upon a stretcher, and was oppressed by a sense of foreboding.

CHAPTER II

MICHAEL rose late the following day, feeling terrible. Inveigled by the hilarity of his guests and the problem tormenting his mind, he had taken overnight more drink than was his habit, with the inevitable result. It was nearly lunch-time before he had the courage to emerge from his bedroom and make a long-drawn-out toilet, trying not to look at himself too closely the while. When he at length ventured into the lounge he found his wife already ensconced there, complacently reading the morning Press. She glanced up, surveying him critically, and even in his misery he could not refrain from admiring her customary well-groomed appearance, her air of complete composure. She asked, "How do you feel

now, dear?"—for beneath outward aloofness she was not without sympathy.

"Awful," he said, and drew up an easy chair and dropped into it, switching on the electric fire as he did so. The flat was large, streamlined, and centrally heated, but Michael loved comfort as he loved his life, and the world without, frozen beneath a thin crust of snow, had an arctic quality this morning that seemed to creep into the bones. Drawing his chair nearer to the artificial warmth, he sat brooding for a while in silence.

Sling had returned to the club a little after one o'clock in the morning, with no very definite news. Up to the time he left the hospital Tilbury was still in a state bordering upon unconsciousness, and had not recovered sufficiently to explain how his condition had come about. Sling had given the authorities a rough summary of the facts as he knew them, and Tilbury's wife had been duly summoned to his bedside.

"And that," Sling had said, "is as much as anyone can do at the moment. I'll give you a ring in the morning and let you know how things go on."

So far he had not telephoned. Laying aside her newspaper, Mrs Connolly said for the hundredth time, "Without being arbitrary, dear, I can't *think* how such a thing occurred. Imagine if anyone had been arriving just then, anyone who mattered, I mean."

"Let's not go into it again," Michael pleaded. "I've told you how it happened. It was just one of those things. No point in holding an inquest . . ." He paused, aware that the word had an unpleasant sound.

"I know, dear. But it does bear out what I've always said. We've no real organization. Sling is very useful, I agree." Privately she did not mind using his pseudonym. It was only in public that formality was her watchword. "But I can't help feeling he is just a little flippant at times. What *could* he have been thinking of, wandering out last night without a word to anyone, leaving Siegman and that absurd child to look after things?"

"They did all right before he came," Michael submitted.

"Up to a point. But you used to do more yourself, if you remember."

He was beginning, "Now, you won't be begrudging me a little rest——" when the telephone rang. Gracefully she leaned across and, lifting the receiver, listened for a moment. She said, "Yes, this is Mr Connolly's apartment. Who? Oh . . . I see. One moment, please."

She cupped her hand over the mouthpiece and looked at him inquiringly.

"It's a young lady. She says she is from the Cavendish Appointments Bureau. About the job as secretary, or book-keeper, or whatever it was you asked for."

Michael, thinking it was Sling calling, had half risen in his chair, but he sank back again with an air of exasperation. It was over a fortnight since Miss Nutthall, who for three years had acted as stenographer and general keeper of accounts, had deserted him for the more beguiling state of matrimony, and he had not yet found a suitable substitute. He was in no mood now to tackle the problem, and moved his head in strong emphasis of a negative state of mind.

"I can't see anyone to-day," he said. "Tell her to drop in some time to-morrow afternoon."

"Now, darling," Mrs Connolly's eyes were alight with the lust for leadership, "procrastination will never get you anywhere. She sounds a very nice young lady, and it's high time we had some one to take Miss Nutthall's place. You can't expect me to do everything, and from the clerical point of view you're hopeless." Without waiting for his reply, she returned her attention to the instrument. "Hallo, Miss—Page, is it? Well, Miss Page, if you care to come round now Mr Connolly will see you. Yes, right away. Is that convenient? Very well. Good-bye."

She hung up and looked across at her husband with undisguised triumph.

"There you are. That's the way things should be done. No delay, no fuss. You'd better pull yourself together, dear."

In silence he leant over and pressed the bell, and when the maid appeared, said, "Some coffee, please, Vera. Strong and black and hot."

"Lunch will be ready soon, sir. Wouldn't you rather wait?"

He all but groaned.

"Don't talk to me about lunch, there's a good girl. Just get me some coffee."

She glanced across at his wife, accepted her nod of assent, and withdrew, just as the front door-bell rang. They heard her move along the corridor to admit the visitor, and a little later Sling entered, hatless, a heavy overcoat swathing him to the chin, and a few snowflakes adhering to his dark hair. He seemed to thrive on little sleep, for his face showed no sign of weariness as he greeted them, peeled off his coat, and flung it over the nearest chair.

"Well?" Michael asked, and Mrs Connolly, pulling forward a chair, said, "Come and sit down and tell us all about it."

"Nothing much to tell," Sling remarked, ignoring the chair and leaning against the table as he lighted a cigarette. "It's all over, bar the shouting. Tilbury died."

"Did he, bejabers!" Michael sat up, unconsciously crossing himself. "When?"

"About five o'clock this morning. 'He never regained consciousness, and his widow was with him to the end.' I quote the doctor's words verbatim."

"But what did he die of?" Mrs Connolly asked, fixing the young man with her bright, shrewd gaze that brooked no vagueness. "A man can't just die of nothing. He wasn't old, and he didn't drink—that we do know."

"Heart-failure. At least, that's what the doctors say. He didn't drink because he was liable to conk out at any moment. They consulted his own doctor, who's been treating him for years."

"Well, that's a relief," Mrs Connolly said, and added, as though to efface any impression of callousness, "Of course, it's very sad. Such a nice man, intelligent, refined. But one can't help being glad that the whole thing has settled itself so reasonably."

Michael, watching the younger man, caught his look of interrogation and grinned, a trifle unhappily.

"Go ahead, Sling," he said. "You may as well give us the whole thing. What else?"

"The bruise on his head. The doctors reckon he might have got it by falling, but for some reason the police aren't satisfied."

"And what do you think?"

"I'm with them—in opinion if not in sentiment. I think there was a spot of snakery."

"A spot of what?" Mrs Connolly demanded. "I wish you wouldn't use these slang expressions."

"Sorry. I was trying to indicate that the police suspect what is technically known as foul play."

"Indeed? And why?"

"Well, for one thing if a man conks out . . . I beg your pardon, if a man has a heart attack and falls and hits his head, he doesn't usually get up again and stroll along to his favourite club."

"I suppose there'll be an inquest?" Michael asked, gloomily reflective.

"You bet. And I imagine a large policeman will be round here presently asking questions."

Mrs Connolly leant across to a side-table and selected an unaccustomed cigarette. She remarked, with her usual composure, "Well, we've nothing to hide, have we?"

"No." Adroitly Sling moved to supply her with a light. "No, we've nothing to hide. All the same, for curiosity's sake I'm going to get hold of young Ramon and ask him a few questions on my own account."

The front door-bell rang again. Mrs Connolly said, rising, "That'll be Miss Page. I'd better tell Vera you're expecting her," and she moved to the door. Sling asked, with mild surprise, "Miss who?"

"Oh, some tatty book-keeper Lilian asked along," Michael said, when his wife was safely out of hearing. "She's got some crazy idea that we need more organization. Not that I'm against efficiency, Sling. You know that, and I still think you shouldn't have gone out last night. But I'm not going to have a united front of women bossing me about on my own premises. One is bad enough. Miss Nutthall was all right. She didn't get in my way. But if this one——"

He stopped there, for the door had opened again and Mrs

Connolly had come in, smiling her special smile. She said, "Miss Page is here to see you, dear." And added in an undertone, "Do pull yourself together, Michael. You look anything but business-like."

Thus admonished, Michael rose to his imposing height, straightened coat and collar and tie, and tried to appear as if standing behind a roll-topped desk. But the girl who entered at Mrs Connolly's invitation was not formidable. She was small, but in nice proportion, with a smooth, serene look about her, and wide blue-grey eyes which gave her charming face an expression of such sweetness and innocence as one usually associates only with extreme youth. But a second glance assured Michael that she must be in her middle twenties, and when she half smiled and said "Good morning" he unconsciously relinquished his aggressive attitude and relaxed into a comfortable position astride the hearthrug. She was, he congratulated himself happily, on his side. Mrs Connolly, who had already noted with satisfaction the modest elegance with which she wore her well-tailored clothes, laid a companionable hand on her shoulder.

"Won't you sit by the fire, Miss Page? It seems to be turning very cold."

"Very. But seasonable," Miss Page said. "Thank you."

She seated herself on a straight-backed chair with a composure equal to that of Mrs Connolly. Sling, who had been observing her with more intentness than good manners allowed, stretched himself and yawned.

"I'll be getting along, Mike," he said. "Could do with some shut-eye. Cheeroh, Mrs Connolly. See you later."

And he seized his coat and was half-way out of the door before either realized his intention.

"Won't you stay for lunch?" Michael asked, following and overtaking him as he reached the front door. And in a whispered aside, "What do you think of her?"

"Who? Oh, the little lady? Charming, and about as much good to you as a kick on the shin."

"Now, Sling." Michael's expression was almost comic in its disappointment. "We're thinking of taking her on as book-keeper."

"I thought you were the man who wouldn't be bossed about by a woman?"

"So I won't. This one isn't the bossing type. Anyone can see that."

Sling, struggling into his coat, eyed him coldly.

"No? Well, that's not how I see it. A woman with a face like that is capable of anything. You'd better be getting back before they reorganize the whole shoot between them."

Michael was annoyed. "Listen, Sling," he said, "whose club is it? Mine or yours?"

"It seems to me it's yours when things are going nicely and mine when they're not. But perhaps I'm prejudiced. So long, Mike. See you to-night—in one piece and your right mind, I hope."

And he was off, leaving Michael to close the door and stride back to the lounge in some indignation. Mrs Connolly was saying, "I'm sure we should get on very well together, Miss Page. You'd like club life. The hours are a little irregular, but you'd soon get used to that, and it would be a change from ordinary routine."

"Well——" Miss Page began, but the older woman rushed on. "Our clientele is very select, of course. Only the best people come to Connolly's. Were it not so I shouldn't *dream* of employing anyone as young as yourself. But you seem to have a very shrewd head on your shoulders, and—yes, I think you would fit in excellently."

Michael, discovering that Vera had brought in the coffee, poured himself a cup and surveyed the two of them, trying to think of something suitable to say, something to eradicate his sense of being superfluous. Mrs Connolly looked up from the notes she had been making.

"Michael, dear, I was just telling Miss Page that I think she will be very suitable. She has been working at the Hotel Rouen, in Grosvenor Square. She acted as secretary, book-keeper, and receptionist." She emphasized the last word, as if to indicate that it was indeed a welcome accomplishment. "Now, as you know, there is not a great deal of clerical work to be done, and I thought Miss Page might fill in her time

by receiving guests. It would make a nice little change for her, and we do *need* some one we can rely on. Don't you agree?"

Michael was anything but happy. He looked from one to the other, and, remembering Sling's words, tried to hide his dismay beneath an air of authority.

"You say you worked at the Hotel Rouen, Miss Page? For how long?"

"Two years, Mr Connolly."

"Any special reason for leaving?"

She raised her head from contemplation of the floor, and her expression was sweetly grave.

"My employer died, Mr Connolly."

He lapsed into silence then. For the life of him he could think of no remark that was not tactless, trite, or wholly irrelevant. Besides, he argued mentally, he liked this girl. She was a decided improvement upon Miss Nutthall, to the extent that he wondered his wife should have fastened upon her with such tenacity. It was only Sling who was prejudiced, and who was he, anyway? He asked, "D'you think you'd like the job, Miss Page?" and felt warmed by the charm of her smile when she said, "I think so."

"There! You see?" Mrs Connolly was delighted. "That's settled, then. You'd like to start as soon as possible, wouldn't you? Shall we say this evening, at eight-thirty, and I'll be there personally to show you round?"

"It's very kind of you, Mrs Connolly, but there are just one or two things I have to attend to, and——"

"Yes? Well, let me see. It is now one-fifteen. That gives you quite a long afternoon, doesn't it? Really, I think it is amazing what one can do in a single afternoon. I know I sometimes have my hands absolutely full, but somehow I get through it all, and there I am with time positively dragging. We'll say eight-thirty, then?"

Miss Page looked appealingly at Michael, but he had metaphorically washed his hands of the affair and was standing staring vaguely at the carpet. She said then, "Very well, Mrs Connolly. Eight-thirty."

"Splendid!" The latter rose, smiling, as she invariably did

when she had her way, and escorted the girl to the outer door, returning a few minutes later to enjoy her triumph.

"How you'd muddle along without me I can't imagine," she said. "You've a wonderful personality, Michael, but when it comes to business . . ." She shrugged her shoulders.

He had flopped back into his chair, and sat, head resting on one hand. He was very tired. He remarked, "She seems a nice young lady, but we don't know much about her."

"I didn't know much about you when we were married," she retorted, "but I survived." She crossed to the table and picked up the slip of paper on which she had made her notes. "Here I have all particulars. Christina Page, twenty-four. Address: 3 Feltham Place, W.C.2—that's a young ladies' hostel, or some such thing, I believe. Her people live in Shropshire. Last employer: Mr Kennedy, Hotel Rouen, Grosvenor Square. I shall telephone him this afternoon."

"He's dead," Michael reminded her.

"Yes, of course. How provoking. Well, there must be some one responsible there. On second thoughts, I won't bother. I'm a very good judge of character, and if I take to anyone they're all right." She came to sit on the arm of his chair and ran a hand over his hair with unexpected good humour. "What's the matter, darling? I should have thought you'd have been pleased, the way I've managed it all so well?"

"I'm tickled to death," he said. "But Sling won't like it."

"Sling? What has he to do with it? Really, dear, you allow that young man too much freedom. I know he's useful, but he does take liberties. After all, you *are* the boss, aren't you?"

"That's what I ask myself," he said, and sighed, a trifle wistfully.

As Michael had anticipated, Sling received the news of Miss Page's appointment with something approximating to a scowl. Seated on the edge of Michael's desk that evening, he said, "But what in the name of blazes is she going to do, apart from making a nuisance of herself?"

"Well . . ." Michael looked vague. "There's all Miss

Nutthall's work been piling up in her office for the last fortnight. Lilian hasn't been able to cope with it, and she thought this girl might be able to do a bit in the way of receiving people, looking after their comfort; that sort of thing." And, observing Sling's expression of scepticism, he pushed the brandy bottle across the table and added, "Have a drink."

"Thanks." Sling helped himself, and held the glass up to the light, examining it with a speculative eye. "To past freedom," he went on, taking a long pull. "The whole thing sounds pretty screwy to me, but if Mrs C. has made up her mind, there's no more to be said. Where is she now?"

"Showing Miss Page round. Now don't take this to heart, boy. I'm sure that little girl is going to settle in very nicely and help us out quite a bit."

"That's sweet of her," the young man said, and replaced his empty glass upon the table.

"Have another," Michael urged, willing even to sacrifice his precious brandy to tide over an awkward moment.

"No, thanks." Sling rose and strolled to the door. "I think I'll go and join the ladies."

Michael put one foot up on the desk and leaned back in his chair, eyes closed.

"Just as you like. I'm going to snatch ten minutes while the coast is clear. Feel as if I hadn't slept for years."

Outside Sling found everything comparatively quiet. It was early yet, and the few guests who had arrived sat at the bar, drinking and talking in subdued voices. The revelry of the previous night was over. This was the first evening of a new year, and had to be treated accordingly. And although all traces of yesterday's celebrations and general pandemonium had been removed by meticulous cleaners, the aftermath, quiet and rather dreary, was all too obvious to any sensitive spirit. Sling glanced into the cocktail bar, exchanged greetings with various people, and politely refused invitations to join them. The dining-room was as yet empty, save for the waiters, who were putting finishing touches to impeccable tables, their faces, weary with years of service, being allowed to assume a natural expression in the absence of customers. Sling, looking

in for a moment, nodded, and exchanged a grin of camaraderie with them all. He had the gift of being at home with staff and clientele alike. In the corridor leading to the kitchen quarters he encountered Mrs Connolly, deep in conversation with Miss Page. The latter was dressed in black, unobtrusively but with charm and dignity, and stood back a pace as he paused. He said, "Good evening, Mrs Connolly. You're looking your usual cool and delightful self. Don't know how you manage it, after last night. Personally, I feel a wreck."

"Really?" Mrs Connolly's expression was non-committal. "You don't get enough sleep, my dear. I was telling Michael so, only this morning. Incidentally, I've not introduced you. Miss Page, this is Mr Fitzroberts. A very useful man to know. He'll always help you out if you're in any difficulty. Miss Page is our new book-keeper, and she has also agreed to do a little receptionist work, correspondence, and so on. I think she will be very helpful."

"How interesting," Sling said, and bowed, and Miss Page remarked with due convention, "How do you do?" staring at him the while out of round, innocent eyes.

"By the way," Mrs Connolly continued, her smooth brow furrowed for the moment in thought, "do you know Señor Vasquez? A little man with dark hair, South American, I believe. He was here last night, inquiring for Mr Tilbury. I found him when I came in, looking all alone and rather helpless, so I invited him to our table. He left before you arrived."

"I know him," Sling said. "A smooth gentleman, and anything but helpless, if you'll forgive the correction. Cunningham introduced him. Loaded with dough, and not too proud to make a spot more, I imagine."

"I thought him charming. One mustn't despise a man because he has money."

"One doesn't. I don't despise you and Michael." Her frown deepened, but he was apparently impervious to disapproval, for he continued, "No, I'm not despising Mr Vasquez. He made his money quite as honestly as most people do, and who am I to quibble? He comes from Mexico. Snatched a gold-mine during some revolution or other.

Some people say he started the revolution, but that strikes me as uncharitable "

"He was here earlier this evening," Mrs Connolly said. "He was very persistent regarding Mr Tilbury, so I told him the poor man had met with an unfortunate accident."

"That was a nice way of putting it "

"Well, one has to be circumspect But we must not stand around here chatting We're on our way to the kitchen I think it would be a good idea to show Miss Page everything, and then she'll know her way about "

"I shouldn't bounce in on the chef just yet," Sling said. "He's in a hell of a bad temper "

Mrs Connolly hesitated Obviously she did not like the suggestion that she could not manage any situation On the other hand, the temperament of the chef, who was half French, half Spanish, was only too well known, encompassing as it did a weakness for brandishing carving knives and offering personal violence to those who worked with, above, and below him At such times he became not only unmanageable but incomprehensible to all but Ramon, whose duty it was to act as interpreter Apparently Mrs Connolly decided that this was not the moment to exert authority, for she shrugged her shoulders and said, "Perhaps it would be as well, Miss Page, if we were to step into the office. There are one or two things I should like to go over with you "

And she walked away with impressive dignity, taking her protégée with her Sling followed, grinning slightly, and watched them enter the office next door to Michael's, where Miss Nutthall had lately presided. The door closed, and he turned away and strolled over to where Mr Siegman, behind the counter of the men's cloakroom, was reprimanding Ramon for some misdemeanour, real or imaginary. Sling said, "Leave the kid alone, Siegman. You were young once, or were you? Have a cigarette?"

"Good evening, Mr Fitzroberts." Siegman turned, his manner changing on the instant to one of respectful interest. He accepted a cigarette and placed it carefully in his case, which he restored to an inside pocket. "Thank you. I'll keep that for later. I was just impressing upon this young

man that he'll never succeed if he doesn't pay attention to details. Uniform all over the place, hair uncombed. It's not good enough."

"He's all right," Sling said. "He knows a lot more than I did when I was his age, which is saying something."

The bell rang. He said, "I'll answer that," and pulled back the grille and looked out, eyes inquiring. A man stood there, tall and slightly stooping, his face in shadow. He submitted tersely, "Detective-Inspector Flash, C I D," and Sling, without argument, opened the door, examined the visitor with a swift, all-embracing stare, and stood aside for him to enter.

"Admission gratis to you, sir," he said. "What would this be? A courtesy visit? Or have you come to wish us a happy new year?"

"I'll see Mr Connolly," the man said.

"Right now Mr Connolly is busy. Exceptionally so. Can't I interest you in some one else? Me, for instance?"

The inspector was looking about him, more with the interest of one who renews acquaintance with familiar things than that of a newcomer. He repeated, "I'll see Mr Connolly," and Sling, accepting the inevitable, went across to Michael's office, knocked, and entered, closing the door behind him. The latter, who had placed his hat over his eyes for greater comfort, sat up and stared at this rude interruption of his dreams. He began, "What in hell—" but Sling made an admonishing gesture.

"There's a snooper outside wants to see you."

"A which?"

"A C.I.D. man. A sinister-looking individual, hiding his secret thoughts behind a mask of indifference. Want to see him?"

With precision Michael removed his hat and flung it on to the stand, brought out a cigarette, and lighted it, glowering at the smoking match as he tossed it into an ashtray. He said, "I don't want to, but what else can I do? Send him in."

"Just as you say," Sling said. "Ring once if you want any help."

He retreated and beckoned the waiting detective, who came heavily across, entered, and closed the door with more

decision than politeness. Michael, looking up, observed the tall, lean figure, the face thoughtful, reposed, and somewhat colourless, with eyes shrewd and incapable of rest, and sprang to his feet and came round the desk to shake his visitor firmly by the hand. He exclaimed, "Fleece me of a fiver if it's not Flash-in-the-pan!" and the other winced, as though at an unpleasant memory.

It had taken years to live down that nickname, bestowed upon him when, as an aspiring constable, he had worked long and diligently to make the slow progress upward from the ranks. The fact that the rise to his present status was due entirely to his own methodical, punctilious effort had added to his pseudonym a certain irony, which appealed to many possessed of this particular kind of humour. Although it was no longer generally used, the nickname had the unwelcome habit of popping up on occasions such as this. Michael he had known since his early days in the police force, when they were both considerably younger and his duty had forced upon him the necessity of taking the Irishman into custody on the old, familiar charge of being drunk and disorderly in the Edgware Road. Their paths had crossed many times since, but in a more friendly and respectable fashion, until acquaintance had ripened into familiarity, and Frank Flash could drop in any time at Connolly's and find a welcome.

He said now, returning the pressure of the Irishman's heavy hand, "Nice to see you again, Mike. Just dropped round to wish you a happy new year. How're things?"

"Fine, Frank, just fine. Have a drink."

Michael dropped into his chair again, poured out two glasses of brandy, and pushed one across the table. Flash said, taking a seat opposite, "Thanks very much. That's a treat, I must say. Cheerio and all the best."

"Down the gullet," Michael said, and acted accordingly. The detective put his hat on the table and ran a hand through his thinning light-brown hair. He brought out his case and mechanically selected a cigarette, with the same gesture offering one to Michael. He said, lighting up, "I've been meaning to drop in for some time, but you know how it is. Rushed off my feet. Every one down with 'flu. Rotten time

of the year, this. Find yourself doing three people's work if you've a constitution like mine."

"Rotten," Michael agreed. "I've been wondering when you'd come round. You should have been here last night. . . ."

He paused, and there followed a moment of uneasy silence, during which he avoided the other man's impassive gaze. The latter said at last, "I was busy. Don't have much chance to celebrate New Year's Eve in my job. It's different with you club people. Plenty of money about, I suppose?"

"Enough," Michael said. "Have another drink."

"Thanks. It's surprising where people get their money from, and what they'll do to get it." He leant across the table and looked squarely into Michael's face. "They'll rob and cheat and lie and even murder. And, talking of murder, there's a member of your club by the name of Tilbury, I believe?"

Michael, raising glass to lips, looked over the rim of it in suitable astonishment.

"Were we talking of murder, Frank? I thought we were discussing money."

"Money often leads to murder, and murder to money," Flash said. "Did you know him well?"

Michael finished his drink and stared at the glass in his hand as if its empty condition puzzled him. He said reproachfully, "I might have known. Once a policeman, always a policeman. So it's information ye're after, and not a happy new year ye'll be wishing me?"

"No harm in mixing business with pleasure," Flash said, unperturbed, and indicated the brandy bottle. "You do it all the time. Yes, it's information I'm after, Mike. This isn't my job, really. It's Llewellyn's territory, but he's sick, and seeing I know you, I volunteered to drop round and straighten this thing out. All in a nice friendly spirit, of course. Now what can you tell me about Mr Tilbury?"

"Nothing," Michael said, with a grandiloquent gesture. "I leave that kind of thing to my staff. Hold on a minute and I'll see what I can do."

He pressed a buzzer, and upon the instant the door opened and Sling appeared. A charitable mind would have assumed that this was super-efficiency, and duly applauded, but Flash

had an instinctively suspicious nature and gathered that the young man had been listening in close proximity to the door. But his face showed no animosity towards the newcomer. Michael said, suddenly business-like, "I'd like any details you have regarding one of our members, a Mr Tilbury. He was here last night, if you remember, and was—er—taken ill."

Sling looked blankly from him to the detective and then at the ceiling. He repeated, "Tilbury? Let me see, now——"

But Flash brusquely interrupted his ruminations.

"We'll have it straight, if you don't mind," he said, "and no frills on. Mr Connolly and I are old friends, and have no secrets from each other."

"Really?" Sling looked astonished. "Well, in that case——"

"Go ahead and tell him all about it," Michael said. "But you understand, Frank, this had nothing to do with us. Nothing at all. Tilbury just blew in here. . . ."

"Just a minute." Flash brought out notebook and pencil and fixed them both with a look of supreme severity. "One at a time. And I'll hear this young man first. Now, who let him in?"

"Shouldn't you warn me that anything I say may be taken in evidence, etc. . . .?" Sling asked, and Flash frowned.

"Allow me to know my own business," he said. "This isn't a murder case, yet. We're just making a little informal investigation concerning the exact circumstances of Mr Tilbury's death. You were saying——?"

"It was like this," Sling said, and having brought out a cigarette and lighted it, he sat down on the edge of the desk and proceeded to give a brief but graphic description of the previous night's incident as he knew it. A surreptitious gesture from Michael had assured him that he need keep nothing back. Michael readily corroborated his story, with many ejaculations to relieve his feelings, and urgent appeals to the C.I.D. man, in recognition of a long-standing friendship, not to bring the name of Connolly into disrepute.

"I'll do what I can, Mike," Flash said. "I never make trouble where it's not necessary, as you know. This'll probably work itself out all right. On the other hand. . . ." He shrugged. "I'd like to see this man Siegman and the boy."

"Sure. Get them in, will you, Sling?"

"Just a minute. I'd like to have this gentleman's name."

"Certainly." Sling paused half-way to the door. "Horatio Ivor Alexander Fitzroberts."

Flash raised his pencil and eyebrows at the same time, appealing to Michael for confirmation. The latter nodded.

"Awful, isn't it? We call him Sling. What else can you do with a bunch of names like that?"

Flash, writing busily, asked, "Where do you live?"

"At Number Three Buckingham Square, S.W.1. A block of service flats for respectable bachelors. We have our own swimming-pool, snooker, and table-tennis, not to mention the restaurant. You ought to come along some time, Inspector, and have a cut from the joint, chips, and one green veg."

He went out, and Flash looked up wrathfully from his notations.

"Is that your funny man, Mike? Because he doesn't make me laugh."

"Sling's all right," Michael said uneasily. "It's just his way."

"Well, he'd better not try any of his tricks with me. Where did you find him?"

Michael explained, and only under the detective's interrogation did he begin to realize how little he knew regarding his right-hand man. Somehow the official, impersonal questions made their association sound feeble and extremely unbusiness-like. He was relieved when, after a knock at the door, Siegman entered.

The attitude of the latter was one of mild indignation that he, a respectable member of society, should be questioned by the police. Haltingly, and with some reluctance, he confirmed Sling's story, in so far as he could, emphasizing several times that he was at the telephone, ordering a taxi for Mr Cunningham, when Mr Tilbury was admitted. Afterwards he had helped Mr Connolly to carry the unfortunate gentleman into the office, and had returned to his post of duty. He knew that Mr Fitzroberts had later taken the gentleman away in an ambulance. After that he knew

nothing. People were not in the habit of confiding in him, he added, with a touch of asperity.

Ramon, entering some minutes after he had gone, was more communicative, but not particularly helpful. He was inclined to embark on a long discourse on his emotions, and those of his ancestors had they been confronted with similar circumstances. But Flash, coldly practical, insisted that he should keep to facts. He declared, under cross-questioning, that Mr Tilbury had threatened to break down the door if not admitted, and that it was this, and the insistence of Mr Cunningham, that had caused him to fling wide the sacred portals. Carefully he avoided the look of withering scorn that Michael was casting in his direction, and withdrew as soon as he was permitted to do so. But not for long.

Flash had put away his notebook and, judiciously changing the subject, was adding to his store of information by listening to a general discourse on club life from Michael, who, out of sheer relief, felt bound to talk about something, when the door burst open without ceremony and Ramon rushed in.

"Señor!" he exclaimed. "The chef!" And he broke into a complicated and voluble explanation in Spanish. It was only after some minutes' patient questioning that they elicited the information that the chef was in the throes of an unprecedented fury, and was threatening to cut all throats within a five-mile radius.

"Looks as though I'd better be going," Flash said, not unamused. "Domestic squabbles aren't in my line. I'll look in, Mike, and let you know how things go on."

"Do," Michael adjured him. "Glad to see you any time, Frank. Just now it looks like trouble on my hands."

But he delayed long enough to see the detective off the premises before following Sling to the kitchen quarters, whence there penetrated the noises of a miniature war in progress. Within the confines of the kitchen was grouped a motley collection of people: Ramon, the head waiter, an under-waiter, the second cook, the vegetable maid, the scullery maid, Mrs Connolly, Sling, and, dominating his audience, the chef, small, dark of hair and eye, with fat, short hands, in which he clutched a powerful carving-knife. He

was standing, when Connolly entered, with his back metaphorically and literally to the wall, challenging all comers, his voice rising on a crescendo of French and Spanish expletive. At his side Ramon tried valiantly to pacify him, but without much success. Sling, cigarette in hand, was endeavouring to make an unobtrusive approach, presumably with the idea of gaining possession of the knife. For the rest, the head waiter was shouting in French, the under-waiter was cursing under his breath, the culinary assistants were near to tears, and Mrs Connolly stood silently by, making an effort to look aloof and dignified. Michael, who in an emergency always believed in the method direct, demanded, "What in hell is all this about?"

They tried to tell him, but it was some time before he managed to piece together a rough idea of what had gone before. It appeared that a guest had ordered, somewhat ill-advisedly as it later transpired, the Spanish dish *Arroz con Pollo*—rice with chicken, in point of fact. But when this succulent fare, prepared by the chef's own hands, had been placed before him he had announced his inability to eat it without the addition of a special and complicated Spanish sauce. The combined arguments of waiter and head waiter having proved futile, they had reluctantly reported the matter to the chef, only to meet with a vitriolic condemnation of the guest in question and an adamant refusal to pander to such lunacy. Never in the chef's experience had that dish been served with a sauce, neither was it going to be while he was in possession of the kitchen and his full mental faculties.

"Who's the mug who started the rumpus?" Michael asked, of no one in particular. His wife said, "Señor Vasquez, dear. But one can't really blame him. After all, he should know what he's talking about. And one must remember that the customer is always right."

A fresh outburst of rage came from the chef, partly at this lack of faith in his judgment, and partly because Sling, taking him unawares, had seized the carving-knife and was bearing it away. Michael said hastily, recognizing a natural belligerence superior to his own, "I'll go and talk to him," and was about to leave the scene of action when the door opened and Miss

Page entered. She was smiling, and her sweet face wore an expression of calm satisfaction, in sharp contrast to the harassed countenances around her. She said, approaching the fiery-eyed little man, who had now commandeered the frying-pan as the next best weapon of attack, "It's all settled, chef. I've had a chat with Señor Vasquez, and he admits now that you are perfectly right. He must have been thinking of something else."

A hush fell upon the kitchen, and the faces of those who had been trying to think of a way out of the dilemma gradually relaxed into expressions of relief. The chef, relinquishing the frying-pan, moved his lips for a few seconds in silence, as if trying to formulate something intelligible. He said then, voice still hoarse from recent temper, "No sauce, miss?"

"No sauce," she repeated gravely, and a slow smile spread over his swarthy features. The next moment he had seized one of her hands, kissed it, exclaimed upon her supreme intelligence, her beauty, and exquisite understanding. Then with a sweeping gesture he consigned the rest of them to the devil, and turned his back upon them, to become instantly absorbed in culinary operations. His staff leapt to assist him, and the remainder of the company, realizing their redundancy, slowly withdrew and dispersed.

Michael, catching his wife's glance, said, "That was nice work, Miss Page. How did you do it?"

"Oh, it was nothing. I just explained to Señor Vasquez that our chef is not only one of the finest in the world but also a student of gastronomy, and if he says a thing is so, it is."

Mrs Connolly said complacently, "That's just what we need, Miss Page. A little common sense and mountains are soon reduced to molehills. If you'll come with me, my dear, I'll show you the rest of the premises."

Sling said, looking after their retreating figures, "Common sense my foot! I'd call it sex appeal."

"Boloney," Michael scoffed. "She's not that kind."

"Maybe not. But in a quiet way she could start a riot in a churchyard." He lit a cigarette and added thoughtfully, "It's a funny thing about that fellow Vasquez. Wherever he turns up there seems to be trouble."

CHAPTER III

NORMALLY Frank Flash was not a man to grumble. He liked the police force, he had wanted to be a policeman even from childhood, and in later life he had never known regret over his choice of a profession. But there are limits to enthusiasm, and these he was gradually approaching.

Prior to the doubtful end of Alfred Tilbury he had been engaged, and heavily so, in the working out of an entirely different type of problem. For the past eighteen months there had occurred in London a series of robberies entailing the disappearance of valuable art treasures from museums, picture galleries, and private collectors. They had begun in a small way, a priceless miniature here, a rare item of jewellery there, a world-famous museum piece of pottery somewhere else, the whole adding up to the conclusion that the thefts, wherever they appeared, had been organized by the same brain, or several working in unison. On the face of it, that should not have constituted a major enigma. The methods used, in several instances, were similar to those of certain known criminals, but the snag lay in the fact that those suspected, although not always in a position to produce fool-proof alibis, could certainly appear as innocent as the dawn in that none of the missing items could ever be traced to them, or to the receivers with whom they were accustomed to deal.

Just three days before Tilbury's death a Chinese vase, the only known specimen of its kind and famous throughout that portion of the world interested in such things, had been stolen from the Venner Art Galleries. Its exact worth was not easily assessed, but according to one collector interviewed by a news-hungry Press, he, personally, would have been prepared to give in the neighbourhood of £10,000 for it. That was, he added hastily, had it been available for legitimate sale.

The attendant who was on duty at the time of the robbery nurtured suspicions regarding a young man whom he afterwards recalled as having taken what he described as "undue interest" in the vase in question. He referred to the suspect

as being young, not more than twenty, fair, good-looking, and dressed "very arty," in check trousers, a corduroy jacket, and a red silk necktie. Such a description was not, however, liable to prove very helpful. Flash had only a superficial knowledge of the world of art, but he was well aware that art galleries are thronged with just such young men, and that it would be illogical to fasten upon one more than on another. Furthermore, the attendant had been unable to identify the said young man from the vast number of photographs submitted to him at Scotland Yard, and it seemed wise, therefore, to regard his suspicions with caution.

Flash, on the other hand, had suspicions of his own, which he was in the throes of putting to the test when he was called upon to investigate the Tilbury case. As a consequence he was not the happiest of men to leave his case. But with so many of his colleagues ill there was really no alternative, and at the outset he had comforted himself with the thought that it would not take long to wind up so simple an affair. And in that he would have proved correct had he been possessed of a less meticulous mind. The final verdict of the doctors had been one of heart-failure. According to the statement of his own physician, Alfred Tilbury had for years suffered with his heart, and had been warned against any undue mental or physical exertion. The blow that had caused the bruise on the back of his head was not sufficient in itself to have brought about death, but it might well have been the result of falling, consequent upon a seizure.

Any conscientious representative of the law would have been justified in writing this off as final. But Flash was far from satisfied. It was from such cases, apparently clear-cut but developing all kinds of peculiarities upon investigation, that he had earned his promotion. And once his suspicions were aroused he was not a man lightly to put them aside.

Tilbury's clothes, for instance. He had been wearing evening dress, and the suit had been torn in places and marked by oil stains—surely a remarkable state in which to arrive at Connolly's Club on New Year's Eve. And why should he have arrived at the club at all if he had already been taken with a seizure, and must have been feeling very ill indeed?

Also, according to the cloakroom attendant, he had telephoned to the club earlier in the evening to say he would not be along, so that his friend, Mr Cunningham, need not wait. It was possible, of course, that, having for some reason changed his mind, he was in the neighbourhood of Soho Square when taken ill, and had gone to the club as the nearest place where he was known. Even so, that would hardly account for his threat to break the door down. More natural behaviour would have been to take a taxi straight home.

And at this point arose another question. How had he arrived? If on foot, surely he could not have been taken ill and fallen unconscious in a vastly populated thoroughfare, without some one taking notice? And if by taxi, then the driver must have been mentally in another world not to have observed the condition of his fare, unless he imagined him to be drunk, as Connolly had done. There was one sure and speedy way to check up on that query, and Flash took it. He went to see Mrs Tilbury.

Alfred Tilbury's widow lived in a large house in Kensington, a house furnished in pleasant if somewhat antique style, and crammed with *objets d'art* of all kinds and no very startling value, if their worth could be judged on appearance alone. Neither was this surprising, since Tilbury had owned a small shop in Fagin's Mews, Mayfair, appropriately named the Art Treasures Emporium. This cultural centre had received Flash's careful attention, without any useful result. Its annual turnover was not large, and it appeared to have been run more as a hobby than as a lucrative source of income. Tilbury had been possessed of an adequate private income, which he had augmented from time to time by adventures into the mysteries of the Stock Exchange. But in his private life it seemed that art figured largely, to which fact his late residence bore concrete witness.

A prosaic butler admitted Flash to the house, after due inquiries as to his business, and bade him wait in the lounge while he went to ascertain whether his mistress were feeling strong enough to interview so awe-inspiring a person as a member of the police force. Apparently she was, for she appeared upon the threshold some ten minutes later. Flash

had not wasted that brief interval. His prowling steps had taken him twice round the room, during which time he had taken a mental photograph of every object, particularly including pictures, and the many vases, carved figures, and other ornamental items that decorated the mantel. None of them caused him any special interest. Indeed, he was wondering why anyone should clutter up an otherwise attractive room with so much trumpery when Mrs Tilbury appeared, and he turned to survey her in some speculation.

She was a woman of about fifty, with a splendid head of wavy dark hair just beginning to turn grey, and a face singularly unlined, and so vacant in expression that it would have been impossible to imagine anyone regarding her as a responsible person.

"Good morning, Mrs Tilbury." It was nearly two o'clock, but he had not yet lunched, so to him it was still morning. "Very sorry to disturb you at a time like this, I'm sure. But we're making a few inquiries regarding your late husband's unfortunate end, and I'll be very grateful if you'll do your best to help us."

"Of course."

Her voice was heavy as her figure, swathed in some indeterminate afternoon dress, and her manner as vague as her expression. She seated herself upon an old-world chaise-longue and glanced idly round the room, half smiling as her gaze came to rest upon the nearest arm-chair. And Flash, who was not particularly susceptible to atmosphere, had the uncomfortable sensation that she was looking at some one he could not see. She continued, as if talking to herself, "But why should you bother about him? Alfred, I mean. He's dead, isn't he? There's nothing odd about that, is there? Every one has to die some time."

Her complete lack of interest robbed the words of their apparent callousness, but nevertheless Flash was somewhat taken aback. He tried again.

"You're right there, Mrs Tilbury. We all come to it. But as regards your husband, there are certain circumstances . . . well, I may say frankly that we're not entirely satisfied. Now if you could give me a few details about his friends and business associates, and so on. For instance, you must forgive

me for suggesting it, but was there anyone, to your knowledge, who had reason to dislike him—sufficient reason, that is, to wish him out of the way?"

"Dislike him?" She was still staring at the arm-chair, and, fascinated, he found himself doing the same. "Of course, there were plenty of people who disliked him, I expect. Every one is disliked by some one, aren't they?"

"Let me put it more clearly. Was there anyone who was in a position to benefit particularly by his death?"

She looked at him for a moment with a faintly puzzled air, then returned her attention to the chair. She said, "Only me. We've no children, you see, so everything comes to me."

"There is a will, then?"

"Oh, yes. I did insist upon that."

"And his relatives, if any?"

"He loathed them," she said. "They'll get nothing."

He nodded. From Tilbury's solicitor he had already ascertained those facts, but there was no harm in hearing her repetition of them. It gave him time to ponder upon her peculiar personality and unemotional acceptance of her recent widowhood. He asked suddenly, "I assume your husband spent New Year's Eve alone? Or were you with him the first part of the evening?"

"Me? Oh, no. We very seldom went anywhere together. I had dinner here and afterwards went to a bridge party."

"Can you remember about what time he left home?"

"I really don't know." She glanced at her wrist-watch, as if that might help.

"Was it before or after dinner?"

"Before. Yes, definitely before. It might have been six-thirty, I think. Because I said, 'Aren't you dining at home, Alfred?' and he said no, he'd get something at the club."

"Connolly's?" Flash put in sharply.

"Where? Oh, I'm afraid I can't tell you that. He belonged to a lot of clubs."

"Did he say he was meeting anyone?"

"No . . . no, he didn't say that. At least, I don't think so. But then, I didn't ask him. You see, I hadn't left myself much time to dress."

"I see." It would appear, Flash thought, that Mr and Mrs Tilbury were not on the best of terms. "Do you know if he walked, or took a taxi?"

"I really couldn't say. That was a funny thing about Alfred. He wasn't really mean, but he would never phone for a taxi, because he thought the man would expect a bigger tip. It was the same when we came out of an hotel or anything. He'd always walk up the road until he found a taxi, because he hated tipping commissionaires. I used to say to him, 'You've got a mean streak in you, Alfred,' but he took no notice. He never did take any notice of me."

"He left, then, at about six-thirty?" Flash said, trying to keep the conversation from straying. "Would the butler be able to confirm that?"

"He wasn't here that evening."

"And no one else saw him leave?"

"No, I was alone in the house. It was New Year's Eve, of course, and you know what servants are."

"Did you notice anything unusual in Mr Tilbury's manner?"

"He was in a vile temper, but that wasn't unusual."

A point, that, he reflected. It could account for Tilbury's threat to break down the door of Connolly's if it were not immediately opened.

"His temper was somewhat uncertain, then?"

"Uncertain? It was terrible. The doctor always warned him about it. 'My dear Tilbury,' he used to say——"

"Pardon me," Flash said, "but did anyone else know about this?"

"Oh, plenty of people. He made no secret of it. In fact, he liked to use it to end an argument. He'd say, 'One of these days I shall drop down dead.'"

Interesting, Flash thought. Anyone who desired Tilbury's death had only to bring about a seizure. Difficult to prove, though. He said, "And after your husband left you had dinner alone, called a taxi, and went off to your party?"

"I walked," she said. "It's only across the way. Five Abbingdon Terrace. Mrs Sisborough. A very old friend of mine. My husband didn't like her."

"And you stayed there until . . .?" he suggested, thinking that there seemed to be no one point on which this couple had agreed.

"Oh, until about midnight, I should think. No, a while after that. I remember the church bells ringing, so it must have been after midnight. Then the phone rang, and they came through to tell me about Alfred. I wasn't really surprised. I'd always expected it. But just the same, my mind went sort of blank."

And stayed blank ever since, Flash thought, but kept a sympathetic smile upon his hard-worked countenance. The interview was not going as well as it might, but the dogged persistence that was an intrinsic part of his nature prevented him from being discouraged. To him every scrap of information was important. If true it might lead to something big, and if false, then there was always some underlying reason for the informant's duplicity.

That idiosyncrasy of Tilbury's, for example. It might have been due to meanness, as his wife said. On the other hand, perhaps the man had been afraid of some one and his fear took the form of finding his own taxis. Mrs Tilbury was a curious type of woman, but her remarks were not without interest. It would be as well to give her ample time in which to talk. Without invitation, he seated himself and fixed upon his face an expression between absorption and sympathy, and, thus encouraged, she launched into a lengthy diatribe on the habits of her late husband and certain aspects of their life together. From this it emerged that the Art Treasures Emporium had, indeed, been a hobby rather than a source of income to him, and a constant bone of contention between the two of them. For although his wife did not care for his dabbling in art, he, being of independent means as well as nature, dabbled nevertheless, to the extent of filling their home with all kinds of articles which she disliked intensely, and which she was going to clear out as soon as she had the time and energy.

Neither did she care for his business associates. They were, she said, mostly foreigners, and the enunciation of that word brought an expression of distaste to her usually impassive

countenance. She had often urged him to sell the shop, to which he devoted so much of his time, but always he had refused.

"But he can't refuse now," she added, with a certain complacency. "He's dead, so everything comes to me. It'll be nice in Canada."

Questioned on the seeming irrelevance of the last remark, she submitted that she intended selling the shop, the house, and contents thereof, as soon as it was practicable, and retiring to Canada, where she had relatives. Flash, trying tactfully to frame the suggestion that her husband's death had caused her no particular unhappiness, was saved the trouble. She said, "He's dead, thank heaven. I'd no real reason to wish him dead, but I'm glad, just the same. Hearts are funny things, aren't they? You can't play tricks with them. But I always knew he'd die first. Funny, isn't it?"

Frank Flash, whose sense of humour was of the conventional kind, could not agree, but he omitted to say so. He took his departure at last with one lingering glance at the vacant arm-chair that drew Mrs Tilbury's attention. She remained seated, and left him to find his way out, which did not displease him, for he had much to occupy his thoughts.

Mrs Tilbury was something of a mystery in herself. For a woman to make no secret of her satisfaction over her husband's death was unusual. But when she positively emphasized it in the presence of a man who had come to investigate the extraordinary circumstances of that death, the matter invited careful thought. Was she as nebulous a character as she appeared to be? It was not unheard of for a person to adopt such a pose when planning something particularly villainous. It was unfortunate that he had not been able to elicit any definite details regarding Tilbury's recent movements. If reliance could be placed on Mrs Tilbury's statement, six-thirty had been a somewhat early hour for him to have left home. How had he employed the interval between then and the time of his arrival at Connolly's? Either he was a man of impulse or he was not in the habit of confiding in his wife. The latter explanation was the more probable, and she had, in fact, suggested it. But why had he changed his mind and decided

to visit Connolly's, having telephoned earlier to say that he would not be there? And where was he when he put through that call? Not at home, for the attendant had stated that it had come through just after nine, and in any case, according to Mrs Tilbury, their telephone had been out of order some days prior and subsequent to New Year's Eve. True, there was only Siegman's word to say that he had telephoned, but Flash could think of no obvious reason for the cloakroom attendant to lie over a matter that in no way concerned him. Surely it was only Cunningham's affair if Tilbury failed to keep his appointment.

Cunningham. . . . That was another point of inquiry that had yielded little result. He had interviewed Mr Cunningham within the precincts of his sumptuous service flat in the vicinity of Hanover Square. Cunningham, big, beefy, and exuding goodwill to all men, had expressed concern with just the right amount of eloquence over the death of his late business associate. They might, he had confided in Flash over a companionable whisky-and-soda, almost have been called friends—good business friends. Nothing more, nothing less. Tilbury had been a great man for culture, knew quite a bit about art treasures, curios, and so on. They had done many a deal together. He, Cunningham, had quite a collection of odds and ends, nothing remarkable, just things he had taken a fancy to from time to time. Tilbury's little shop was always worth a visit when he was in London. He kept his own collection down at his house in Chichester. He had intended meeting Tilbury at Connolly's Club on New Year's Eve for a little celebration. They often met there. Quiet, convenient, and all that. When he arrived there was a telephone message from Tilbury to say he would not be along, so he had a few drinks and dinner alone, but did not think it worth while to stay for the celebrations. Not much in it, if you were on your own. He was about to leave when Tilbury arrived. He was never so surprised in his life. He could, he averred, have been knocked down by the proverbial feather—which, having regard to his girth and general size, Flash found hard to believe. He had thought Tilbury must be, to put it mildly, under the influence, although he knew that as a rule he did

not drink. Still, it was the last night of the old year, and all that. He was sorry afterwards to hear it was his heart. Poor old Tilbury. Still, no one could last for ever.

In so far as he could, Flash had checked on these details and found them correct. The taximan, who came in answer to Siegman's telephone call, had driven Cunningham straight home. The porter at the block of flats remembered his arrival, for they had duly exchanged New Year greetings. His evening thus accounted for, Mr Cunningham might reasonably expect to fade into the background. But to Flash the background was just as important as the foreground in the solving of crime, and Mr Cunningham was not forgotten.

As his steps unconsciously took him away from Mrs Tilbury's house in Kensington he glanced at his watch, and, observing that it was now too late for lunch, yet too early for tea, he hailed a taxi and drove to the Art Treasures Emporium. He had the feeling that at this stage of the proceedings a further visit to the scene of the late Tilbury's activities might well repay him. He had not yet had the pleasure of meeting Miss Montague, who acted in the capacity of saleswoman, book-keeper, and secretary, and who, on the occasion of his last visit, had not been available, having succumbed to the current epidemic of influenza.

From his experience he conjectured that a lady in so responsible a position must have some interesting knowledge tucked away, even if she were not willing to disclose it. Tilbury may not have been on terms of cordiality with his wife, but most men confide in some one, and there was no particular reason why he should have been an exception to the rule. It would be a slice of luck if Miss Montague should prove to be a helpful informant. So far things had not gone too well. If any local taxi-driver had picked up Tilbury in the vicinity of his home it would be possible to trace the journey and ascertain his destination. But Mrs Tilbury had been distinctly vague regarding the exact time of his departure, whether purposely or because she was made that way it would be difficult to say at this juncture. But assuming the time to be 6.30, his movements between then and his arrival at Connolly's were mysterious, to say the least. He

had not visited any of the clubs of which he was known to be a member, nor the restaurants he was in the habit of patronizing. The earlier part of the day he had spent at the Emporium, and those hours were also a matter of interest to Flash.

A cheerful glow of light came from the little shop when he arrived, for though it was early the day was dark and inclined to be foggy. The mews had not, of course, originally been planned as a shopping thoroughfare, but some one with a strong commercial instinct had converted the premises, and though the result was not particularly successful from an architectural point of view, to make one's purchases in Fagin's Mews had attained a certain snob value among people who set store by such things.

The Emporium was long and narrow, and rather sombre on account of its small, many-paned windows, but a contract with the local electricity company had overcome that minor disadvantage. One had to go down two ancient steps to enter, and one's entrance was announced by a faint peal of bells. Flash, who liked to make his way unobtrusively, frowned, not for the first time, at this contraption, and stood for a moment looking round at the discreetly lighted interior. There were two customers present, an elderly man and woman, standing side by side in earnest debate over some trinket that looked as if it were worth very little and would probably cost them a good deal. In attendance upon them was Dennis Budd, a young man with long, pale brown hair, florid complexion, and a figure that would undoubtedly have run to fat had it been allowed to follow its natural bent. Mr Budd was a salesman—not just an ordinary, obvious salesman who sells for the sake of earning a living, but one of those whose delight it is to persuade the uncultured wealthy classes to take art into their homes. No man or woman who had the price of an art treasure upon their persons had ever been known to enter the Emporium and slip through the æsthetic, well-manicured fingers of Mr Budd.

He stood now, head to one side, expression ecstatic and dreamy, and from his lips flowed such a stream of eloquent phraseology that even Flash, who had met him before and did not like him, was momentarily impressed. Sighting the

detective, he murmured a few words of excuse to his prospective victims and came towards the door with movements that made him appear to be wading through deep water.

"Good afternoon, Inspector." He spoke in a sibilant undertone, impossible to overhear. "What can I do for you?"

"Is Miss Montague back at work yet?"

"Oh, yes. She's at lunch at the moment, but I'm expecting her back shortly. Will you wait, or would you prefer to return later?"

"I'll wait," Flash said, and the young man cast a hurried glance in the direction of his customers.

"Just as you like. I'm engaged for a minute, as you see, but perhaps you would like to look round. I'm sure you'll find much to interest you."

"Thanks. I usually do."

Flash wandered away and became apparently absorbed in contemplation of the stock, in reality covertly watching while the young man returned to the scene of persuasion and inevitable surrender. Amused, he saw the two seekers after beauty vacillating between a Chinese goddess in jade and some complicated Oriental ornament guaranteed to attract the dust if not the eye.

The shop was full of such items, arranged with so much artistry and emphasis upon special lighting that Flash was amazed that anyone should ever be able to make up their minds over the matter of selection. Presumably that was exactly where Mr Budd took over. He was taking over now, to the extent that the elderly lady suddenly and decisively fixed upon the jade goddess, and one more sale was due for entry. A discreet withdrawal to an inner chamber, a rustling of paper and tying of string, and there was Mr Budd bowing and smiling the happy purchasers to the door. He was still smiling when he turned back to find the detective standing and staring up fascinated at the painting of a young woman, wrapped in profoundest melancholy and only the vaguest of clothing, balanced on the edge of a precipice. It was entitled *The Chasm*, and a single light was suspended in gentle illumination above its handsome gilt frame.

"Lovely, isn't it?" Mr Budd said, with the air of one who,

knowing his words to be wasted, yet feels bound to express an inner deep emotion. "Truly lovely. But it would require a large room, large and old and mellow, by way of contrast. But alas, there are so few rooms of that kind now. People are taking to smaller and smaller apartments. Their sense of beauty diminishes every year. Is there anything you're particularly interested in?"

"Plenty of things," Flash said. "I'd like to know what kind of people have been coming here lately?"

"Customers, you mean? Oh, just ordinary people. The usual kind. The two who just left are very typical. Plenty of money but very little culture."

"What about Mr Tilbury's personal acquaintances? Hasn't anyone been in to inquire about him?"

"Not as far as I know. Oh, a gentleman did telephone, but I told him of the unfortunate . . . well, I said, in fact, that Mr Tilbury was no longer with us, and he rang off."

"Didn't he tell you his name?"

"No, he wouldn't say. He just said he was sorry to hear it, and that was all."

"He knew a lot of foreigners, didn't he?"

"I believe so. He had a number of clients with whom he used to deal personally in the matter of buying and selling."

"D'you know any of their names, and present whereabouts?"

"I'm sorry, no. Mr Tilbury was very reticent over such things. The ordinary sales he left almost entirely to me, as I explained previously. But he was a man of great circumspection, and occasionally he liked to take a hand."

"I see." Flash walked away, picked up a tall blue vase, stared at it, and put it down again. "Have you heard that the business is going to be sold?" He turned quickly and observed that Mr Budd was not looking very happy.

"No . . . I hadn't heard that. But I've no doubt if Mrs Tilbury wants to sell she has a very good reason."

"You know her, then?"

"Not very well. I've only met her twice, once when she came here, and another time when I went over to the house with some things Mr Tilbury wanted to see."

Flash was silent for a while, and the young man began to move about the showroom, fussily flicking his treasures with a feather duster, and making little rearrangements, the result of which he stood back to regard with half-closed eyes. He said suddenly, "Of course, the sale of the business would make very little difference to me, even if the new owner preferred to dispense with my services. When one has a cultural background, one can always find fresh fields for one's labours. A career such as this has its advantages, Inspector Clash."

"Flash," the detective corrected him.

"Of course. Forgive me, but I think almost exclusively in terms of light. To me all colour is light and light is colour. Now, yours is a sombre personality, and, seen against a black background such as that velvet curtain, your lack of light causes you to fade, and thus, if you'll pardon my saying so, you do, in fact, clash. Hence the association of ideas. You understand me?"

"To be quite candid," Flash said, "no. I'm in the middle of an investigation, Mr Budd, and if I clash against any of your backgrounds in the course of my duty, just tell me and I'll move. But we'll cut out the sales-talk, and stick to facts, if you don't mind."

Mr Budd opened his mouth to reply, but a peal of bells announced the arrival of Miss Montague, and he turned to her with all too obvious relief. She was a rather pretty girl, tall and fair and with an air of detachment at variance with her colleague's preciousness. And Flash was glad to see that she did not look too intelligent.

"I expect you've a lot of questions you want to ask me," she said, upon introduction. "Come into my office; we'll be more comfortable there. Anything interesting happened, Dennis?"

"I sold a little thing. Nothing very much, but one does one's best." He appeared to have lost interest in the detective, and was busy with the electric-light switches. She laughed.

"You could sell ice blocks at the North Pole," she said, and went into a little room marked "Private." Flash followed, and took the vacant seat she indicated, while she removed her

hat and coat, hung them on the stand, and brought out from her handbag powder-puff and mirror, with the aid of which she proceeded to make superfluous renovations to her make-up. She said, "It was a great shock to us—Mr Tilbury's death, I mean. Of course, we knew he was ill, but no one expected him to go out, just like that. But as I was saying to Mr Budd this morning, you never know what's going to happen from one day to another. It was the same when I caught flu. One moment I was perfectly all right, and the next I was in bed with a temperature. I'm sorry I wasn't here to see you the last time you called. But that's how things happen."

"It's quite all right, Miss Montague," Flash said. "You can't expect always to be on top of the world, can you? And it's a nasty epidemic that's going round. Now, about Mr Tilbury. I'd be very interested to hear anything you've got to say, particularly about his movements on New Year's Eve. How often did he come here, by the way?"

"Oh, about three or four times a week, sometimes more. It's difficult to say exactly. He was always popping in and out."

"Alone, or with friends?"

"Alone. I never remember him bringing anyone here."

"What time did he arrive on the day of his death?"

Miss Montague screwed up her face, indicative of deep concentration. She said, "D'you mind if I smoke, Inspector? It helps me to think, and I usually have one after lunch."

"Have one of these," he said, bringing out his case, and she accepted a cigarette and thanked him with a smile. She went on, after they had lighted up, "It must have been about half-past one, I should think. Mr Budd was at lunch. He always goes first, and I go out later. The restaurants aren't so crowded then. And I always think you get a better lunch. . . ."

"And he stayed until you closed?"

"No, he left early that day, about four-thirty. He was in rather a hurry."

"Did he have any telephone calls during the afternoon?"

"Well, it's funny you should ask that, because he did, as a matter of fact. Of course, there was nothing unusual about that, because people did sometimes phone him here if they couldn't get him anywhere else. But I remember these two

particularly because the first one put him in such a good humour, and after he'd had the second one he was in one of the worst tempers I've ever seen."

Flash glanced at the instrument on the desk and, knowing it to be the only one on the premises, asked, "Did you answer the telephone in the first place?"

"Yes. We have it in my office because it's the most convenient, and whoever happens to be nearest at the time naturally takes the calls."

"And do you know who these people were who spoke to Mr Tilbury? Were they male or female?"

"Well, the first was a man. I don't know his name, but he had phoned once or twice before when Mr Tilbury wasn't here. He had a foreign sort of accent. This time when he phoned I called Mr Tilbury, who was in the showroom, and he shut himself in here and talked for about ten minutes. When he came out he was smiling, and made some joke or other, and seemed very pleased with himself."

"And the other?"

"That was later, about four, when we were having tea. We make it here, you know. It saves going out. By the way, would you like a cup? I could quite easily make it."

"It's very kind of you," Flash said. "But not just now. I'd much rather hear about that telephone call."

"Oh, yes. Well, I happened to be in here and answered the phone again, but really I couldn't say if it was a man or a woman. It was a funny voice, high and sort of nervous. You'll think I'm being imaginative, because it didn't strike me at the time, but now I look back I believe it was disguised."

"Miss Montague," Flash said, with intense gravity, "I don't think you're being imaginative. I think you're a highly intelligent, sensible young lady, and I'm very interested in everything you say. Go on."

He hoped he was not overdoing it. But she seemed gratified at his approval, and drew her fair brows together in fiercer concentration.

"There's nothing much else, except that he came out after talking on the phone and banged the door, and said he'd have to be leaving earlier than he expected."

"And he didn't say where he was going?"

"Not a word. He was like that—very reserved. He never talked to us except about the business. Not that I'm saying anything against him, because a more decent man to work for you couldn't find. And by decent I mean just that. But he never talked about his private affairs. Dennis . . . Mr Budd used to complain about his temper sometimes, but I say it wasn't his fault."

"No?" Flash purposely imbued the word with just the right amount of scepticism, and Miss Montague instantly responded.

"No. Perhaps I shouldn't say this, but it's all in confidence, isn't it, and it can't do *him* any harm. And I always was a person to speak my mind. I don't know his wife very well, but I can't help feeling that his bad moods were due to an unhappy home life. I always say that a woman can make or mar a man, and between her and . . . Oh, well, perhaps the least said, soonest mended."

"Between her and what?" Flash prompted gently. "Remember, Miss Montague, I'm relying on you for any assistance you can give me. I'm not a man to listen to chitter-chatter, but if there's anything you know that may help it's your duty to let me have it."

There came a faint peal of bells, and she jumped nervously, rose, and went to the door and peered out. She returned a few seconds later, having closed the door, and sat down in her revolving chair again. She said, "That'll keep Mr Budd happy. An old lady just came in." Then, leaning suddenly across the desk, "Inspector Flash, you think Mr Tilbury was murdered, don't you?"

He went on regarding her blandly, without a change of expression. He said, "At this stage I'm not prepared to say anything about that."

"But you do think so, don't you? And I'll tell you something. So do I. What's more, I think it was a woman who did it."

"That's very interesting. Any special reason for these suspicions?"

"Oh, nothing that the police would listen to, I dare say." There was the faintest suggestion of a sneer in her voice.

"But Mr Tilbury wasn't expecting to die. That I do know. Why, only two days before he was talking about a sale he was going to attend some time next month. But when a man has a wife he doesn't care for and gets involved with another woman, anything can happen."

"Another woman, eh? Which woman was that?"

"Well, as I say, I can't tell you anything definite. I don't know her name or telephone number or things like that. But I've seen her twice, so I know what she looks like."

"When was this?"

"Not very long ago. About a month or two, I should think. You see, Mr Tilbury never liked us to leave before five-thirty. There are only the two of us, as you know, and the messenger, but he's not much use for anything but packing and unpacking and running errands. So if ever I wanted to leave early, like when I'm going to a theatre and want time to change, Mr Budd has always held the fort, as it were. He's decent like that. Sometimes I think he'd like to bring his bed and sleep here, he's so fond of the place. Anyway, it was all right when we were here alone, but if Mr Tilbury happened to be around it was a bit awkward, because he was a difficult man to deal with in some ways. Fortunately he usually left about half an hour before we did, so if I was in a hurry I'd give him time to get up the road, and then slip out and go the other way." She saw the detective's half-smile, and looked a trifle embarrassed. "It may seem a bit underhanded, but there was no harm in it, and it was better than upsetting Mr Tilbury. So one evening I went out just after he'd left, but instead of going his usual way he'd gone the other, and when I reached the corner of the mews he was just getting into a car. And sitting at the wheel was a woman."

She paused in solemn triumph, and Flash looked suitably impressed.

"Did you see her clearly?"

"Not very, but enough. I was walking rather quickly, hoping that Mr Tilbury wouldn't notice me, and I was lucky, because he didn't. But I remembered that she was dark and plump, and well, I hope you won't think me catty, but she wasn't very young. Neither was she what you'd call a lady."

"What makes you say that?"

"She was rather flashy, if you see what I mean. All gold lamé and furs and a lot of jewellery and make-up. I'm not against make-up, I think it improves any woman, but when it's laid on with a trowel I say it looks vulgar."

"And when did you see her again?"

"A few weeks later. I was coming back from shopping in my lunch-hour, and I saw them driving together across Hanover Square. Mr Tilbury didn't notice me, but the car slowed up at the lights, and I saw her clearly that time. She was in grey, with an enormous silver fox fur and long grey gloves and a red hat, and in my opinion her hairdresser had been pretty busy with the dye. Not many people are born with it absolutely black."

"You certainly have an eye for detail," Flash said admiringly. "The Yard might do well to employ more women. You've no idea where she lives, I suppose?"

"None at all. She's never telephoned here, to my knowledge. Unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

"I was thinking it might have been her telephoning on New Year's Eve, the second time when he got so upset. Men get like that about women sometimes."

"So I'm told," Flash said, and rose. "By the way, you didn't notice anything about the car, I suppose? Its make or number? Or was it his?"

"He didn't have a car, because he wasn't allowed to drive. It was a big grey one, but I can't tell you anything else about it, I'm afraid. I don't know very much about cars."

A pity, Flash thought. But she was an authority on feminine hair and hats, and you couldn't expect everything.

"Well, I'm very much indebted to you, Miss Montague. And if you ever catch a glimpse of this mysterious lady again, perhaps you'll try to find out where she lives. It would be a great help if you could. I'll be dropping in to see you again, I expect, but if anything interesting turns up, give me a ring at the Yard."

He spoke with a conscious air of camaraderie, as one hard-worked sleuth to another. Miss Montague smiled her satisfaction.

"Of course, Inspector. Anything I can do to help will be a pleasure."

He went out, to discover Mr Budd once more alone in a far corner of the showroom, with another sale to his credit, his head bent over the imposing task of unpacking a new treasure from the case in which it had arrived. He turned as the detective approached, and with an obvious effort brought his attention from artistic to mundane things.

"Ah, Inspector . . . and how goes the world of crime?"

"Flourishing," Flash said. "And everything nicely under control. Incidentally, can you remember exactly which day that man telephoned?"

"Which man?"

"The one who rang up to inquire about Mr Tilbury."

"Oh, him. Let me see now. Yes, it was the day after the accident, New Year's Day, that is. Mrs Tilbury had just telephoned to tell us the sad news, and this gentleman got through about half an hour later."

"Did he talk with a foreign accent?"

"Now you mention it, I believe he did. Spanish, I should think. We get quite a few foreigners in here, so naturally one is fairly familiar with most accents." With loving care he dusted the alabaster figure he held in one hand, and, placing it on a marble-topped table, moved back to survey it with ecstatic eyes. "Isn't it exquisite? Such delicate work, such perfect symmetry. Picture the harmony of it against a background of pea-green."

In imagination Flash saw it, and his inartistic mind recoiled at the thought. He said hastily, "I haven't much time now, Mr Budd. Good day to you," and went out, before the temptation to express a downright opinion became too strong for him.

Head bent in thought, he began to walk, glad to be away from the cloying atmosphere of the Emporium. How anyone could think in a place like that he could not imagine. From one point of view, Miss Montague was a disappointment, for unless she had been putting on a pretty good act, her share of Tilbury's confidence had been about as negligible as that of his wife. She was observant, though, which was something

on the credit side. Her resentment towards her late employer's unknown lady friend might cause her to exaggerate, but it was improbable that she could have invented the whole thing. There had been a telling note of vindictiveness in the way she had recounted the story that could not have been artificial. Naturally enough, she had come to the obvious conclusion regarding the lady, completely ignoring the possibility of her being a client rather than a friend. But in the latter case it would seem like carrying reticence a little too far, to meet her on odd street corners. Well, suppose Tilbury had a girl friend? Was that any reason to assume that she wanted him out of the way? She was, apparently, a lady of expensive tastes, in which case he should have been more useful to her alive than dead. Furthermore, he thought, if every married man having an illicit affair were to be eliminated by his girl friend, it would make more work than they could cope with at Scotland Yard under existing conditions.

But if Miss Montague's story was anywhere near true, here was another very good reason for his wife to desire Tilbury's death. On the other hand, the telephone call that had so upset his good humour might have something to do with it.

He glanced at his watch, to find that it was now too late for tea but just on opening time, and he was conveniently near one of his favourite bars. He went in.

CHAPTER IV

CONTRARY to her expectations, Christina Page was finding Connolly's Club a pleasant place in which to work. People were nice to her, which she found somewhat surprising; for as a new-comer she had anticipated a certain amount of animosity, at least for a few weeks. But from the start the general staff had made her feel entirely welcome, and Mrs Connolly had been especially kind. Even Mr Siegman, who was regarded by every one as a man of singularly sour temper, had opened up his frozen heart sufficiently to tell her

something of his private troubles, and to compliment her on what he described as "the way she had got into it."

She gathered from this that he meant the rapidity with which she had adapted herself to club life, and to judge by his gloomy condemnation of his co-workers, getting into it was not so easy as it looked. He personally had been in it for more years than he cared to remember. But despite the air of disparagement with which he spoke, she deemed that he was more conscientious than he would admit, since he was quite often the first to arrive and always one of the last to leave the premises.

She said as much to him one evening at the beginning of her second week, when, passing him *en route* for her office, she had hailed him with a conventional greeting. As it was early, he was disposed to indulge in a lengthy chat, consisting in the main of a diatribe of unusual pessimism on his part and a series of sympathetic remarks on hers.

"But, Mr Siegman," she said at last, "you like being here, don't you? I mean, there's no other club you'd prefer to work in, is there? And you're so used to this life I should think you'd miss it if you tried to change."

"Change? Fat chance of changing I'm ever likely to get," he said. Then the ghost of a smile creased his thin face. "But I expect you're right, Miss Page. What would I do, starting fresh at my age? I wish I had a bit more time to myself, that's all. A few hours spent on the garden wouldn't do it any harm. And the house. . . . But what time do I get? I'm fair done up when I leave this place, I don't mind telling you."

She smiled her understanding. She had already heard several times about the house at Notting Hill, of which he was extremely proud, having purchased it out of his savings, and the garden, well-tended, she had no doubt, despite his assertions to the contrary. He must, she imagined, do very well out of the tips he received at the club to be able to afford any kind of house in London. She had heard, too, all about his wife, who, poor woman, had been sent some two years ago to a sanatorium for the cure of tuberculosis. He did not know when, if ever, she would come out again. And there was

something in his manner that suggested he was very fond of her. Chris, who was genuinely sorry for him, listened to a reiteration of his troubles only half-heartedly this evening. She had work to do, and was in the mood to get on with it. Michael had not yet arrived, but Mrs Connolly was around somewhere, and she did not want it to be thought that she was taking things too easily. Siegman was saying, "You know, Miss Page, one of my real troubles is my teeth. They've never been what you might call good, but lately—well, I don't mind telling you I'm worried. I can't eat anything in comfort."

"Why don't you see a dentist, Mr Siegman?"

"I have." There was a kind of melancholy triumph in the statement. "Five of 'em. And not one could do me any good. There's nothing wrong with them, they say. Just nerves."

Sling came sauntering along the corridor, nodded to them, and went into Michael's office. Siegman looked after him with undisguised malice. He remarked in an undertone, "There he goes, our young Smart Alec. He'll outsmart himself one of these days. But one thing he won't do and that's wear himself out, the amount of work he does. Am I right or am I wrong?"

Chris, who had found Fitzroberts somewhat of a problem in the last week, was inclined to agree mentally. In her dealings with him she was conscious all the time of guarded hostility. He was, in fact, the only person with whom she had not established some kind of friendly relationship. She said, trying to appear impartial, "Oh, I expect he finds plenty to do," and Siegman gave vent to a harsh cackle of laughter.

"Plenty of nothing," he said, and was about to enlarge upon his theory when Sling opened the door again and came across to them. He demanded, "What's that perishing dog doing in Mr Connolly's office?"

The offending animal, a white French poodle with a look of profound curiosity, was peering round the door after him. Siegman shifted uncomfortably, and wore the expression of a man who has just accomplished a vast amount of work and is about to tackle a great deal more. He said, "Well, Mr Fitzroberts, it was like this. Mrs Montmorency came in—you know the lady, always plastered in diamonds—and she said

would we mind him for a bit. I was all for giving her the 'members and their guests only' line, but Mrs C. was here, and said he'd be all right in Mr Connolly's office." And he added apologetically, "His name's Carioca."

"That's such a help," Sling said, and stood for a moment looking as if he were saying some very pertinent things to himself. "Next thing we know she'll be bringing a tame elephant and a kangaroo and expecting them to have drinks on the house. Well, if it messes on the carpet you can tell Mrs Connolly, and don't call me."

He turned and went back the way he had come, and Siegman shrugged his shoulders.

"See what I mean? There's no pleasing him. But Mrs Connolly's the real boss around here, and if she says it's all right, then it's all right as far as I'm concerned. I know my place, and I'll take it from her, but not from him. What did he come here for, in the first place, that's what I want to know?"

Feeling herself about to be drawn into another long discussion, Chris murmured something non-committal, and went across to her own office, where she closed the door and sat down at her desk with some relief. But she had not been working long before a knock sounded on the door, and there entered Harry, the tall, grey-haired kitchen porter and general odd-job man, who also boasted a flair for electrical repairs. He regarded her dubiously.

"Mind if I borrow a lamp from in 'ere, Miss? Blinkin' dog's gone an' knocked it for six next door and we're out of spares. What they want with dogs and suchlike in an office beats me."

"That's all right, Harry," she said. "Come in and help yourself."

"Thanks, miss. Very obligin' of you, I'm sure. Not like some. 'Old still—I shan't be a minute."

With surprising agility he scrambled up on to the desk, narrowly avoiding the light by which she was working, and procured a bulb from the unused chandelier above.

"Thanks again. Very much obliged." He climbed down, blew a cloud of dust from the bulb and rubbed it on his worn

trousers. "Nice job o' work them cleaners do, I must say. Never do an 'and's turn to what you can't see. Times I ask meself oo'd do the work around 'ere if I didn't?"

On a rising crescendo of life's injustice he went out, and with a little smile she again bent over her work, and became completely absorbed. She was unconscious of the subdued medley of noises outside the four walls which denoted that Connolly's was getting into its stride for the evening, until, after a gentle rap at the door, Michael thrust his head round and grinned at her.

"Evening, Miss Page. Everything all right?"

He came farther into the room, looking smooth and good-tempered and well fed, his evening clothes a credit to his wife's vigilance. Chris smiled.

"Perfectly, thank you."

"Good. What are you doing?"

"Straightening things out. These books were in a terrible muddle."

"Were they? Yes, I suppose they were. We all had a stab at them from time to time. Well, do what you can, and don't stick in here too long. They'll be arriving in shoals presently."

Guests at the club were always referred to *en masse* as "they." He went out, and she settled down again with a small sigh. They were very nice to her, but how did they expect her ever to get anything done when they were always popping in and out? The fact that she did only about half the work she was accustomed to did not seem to worry anyone, either. They were a queer lot, she reflected. Nice, but distinctly peculiar. She started nervously when from next door came the sound of a dog barking, Michael cursing volubly, and Sling's voice trying to quieten him. Finally, the level tones of a woman who could only have been Mrs Connolly telling them to remember that this was a respectable club and not a circus, and why did they have to make so much fuss about one harmless and altogether well-behaved dog? A moment later the door of her office opened and Sling walked in. He paused at sight of her. She said, "You seem to be in a hurry, or 'aren't you in the habit of knocking?"

'I'm sorry.' He did not appear to be particularly penitent. "I'd forgotten that behind this door now sits an illustrious presence. Shall I go out again and knock?"

She stared at him for a while, wondering why he should have the knack of bringing out the less equable side of her nature. Then, deciding that the matter was better ignored, she returned her attention to her books. He crossed over to the steel filing cabinet and selected a folder. She heard the rustle of papers, and turned to watch him. She said, "I'd like to mention that I find your filing system here utterly incomprehensible. But perhaps that's because I've been used to the simple method of filing things in alphabetical order."

"Perhaps." He did not look up. "Personally, I find it more convenient to file members in order of distinction."

"But that's absurd. How can anyone who doesn't know them ever hope to find anything? How am I, for instance, supposed to know the distinguished from the undistinguished?"

"You probably don't." He replaced the folder and closed the drawer. "But you'll get into it, as our friend outside would say. That is, if you last that long. I notice, by the way, that you and Cyril are getting on a treat."

"Who?"

"Cyril. Didn't you know that was Mr Siegman's first name? I should have thought you'd found that out by now. Has he been telling you all about his teeth?"

He moved across and sat on the edge of her desk, and she looked at him with an expression between annoyance and reproach. She said, "I don't see why you should joke about him. He's really quite a tragic sort of person. But then you don't take life very seriously, do you?"

"Certainly. It's a great game if you play it with the dice loaded." He brought out his cigarette-case and offered it to her, but she refused with a brief shake of the head, and he selected one and lit it, before he went on, "You don't mind if I smoke? Or does it offend your æsthetic instincts?"

"It makes no difference to me," she said. "But I never smoke while I'm working."

"Neither do I. At least, not much."

She attempted to get on with her work, but he continued to sit there, scrutinizing her, and she looked up again at last in exasperation. He said, "I've been wondering why you came here? This isn't really your sort of racket at all."

"In point of fact, Mr Fitzroberts, I'm not accustomed to any kind of racket. I understood this was a club."

"It's much about the same thing. But you didn't answer my question. Why did you take this job?"

She flushed slightly and put down her pen.

"Let me ask *you* one," she said. "Have you ever tried not interfering in other people's affairs? And another thing. I've managed to get a general idea of what every one is doing in this club, but I'm damned if I can see where you come in, Mr Fitzroberts."

"I knew it." He looked amused. "Beneath that sweet exterior you hide a nasty temper. So you want to know what I do? All right, I'll tell you. I expect you know what a yes-man is—a bloke who hangs around the boss's neck saying yes to every half-witted suggestion he makes?"

"I've heard of such people, yes."

"Well, I'm a no-man. I stand around and say no to everything I consider damn' silly, which is quite a lot, and ninety-nine times out of a hundred I'm right."

"And does Mr Connolly always take your advice?"

"Not always. Over you, he jibbed like a mule."

"Then you thought it your duty to say no to me?"

"It wasn't so much a duty as a pleasure. And I'll go on saying no until . . ."

He blew a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling, and her wide eyes, bereft of their usual serenity, watched its gradual ascent.

"Until what, Mr Fitzroberts?"

"Oh, never mind. And you can call me Sling if you like. I won't take advantage."

She rose slowly to her feet. She said, "I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but it's no use pretending. I've tried to get on with every one, and I think for the most part I've succeeded. But there are some things . . . well, I may as well be perfectly frank and say that you're the only person here I just can't like."

He regarded her for a while in silence, chewing on the end of his cigarette. Suddenly he laughed. He exclaimed, in a fair imitation of a feminine voice, "I know. I'm perfectly *beastly*," and still laughing he went out, closing the door noiselessly behind him. He had a way of opening and closing doors that was peculiar to himself. He had many ways that were strange to her. She seated herself, and stared thoughtfully down at her desk. The front door-bell rang, and a few minutes later he looked into the office to say, "They're beginning to crowd in on us. Aren't you coming to join in the fun? I love to see your talents at work on some of our more hardened cases. And I know you wouldn't deliberately do a poor man out of his job."

"I can't imagine you ever being poor," she said, rising and crossing the room.

"Neither can I. And what a comforting thought that is."

Magically the atmosphere outside had changed. As Sling had said, members and their friends were beginning to crowd in, the cloakrooms were filling up, perfumed women in a wide variety of evening dress were trailing to and from the sanctuary set aside for them, the cocktail bar was the scene of much activity and alcoholic ritual.

But Chris, surveying the dining-room into which she had conducted some of the more hungry patrons, was conscious of a feeling of depression, ill-suited to the general air of relaxation around her. It was as though, beneath all this apparent light-heartedness, something unpleasant lurked, something that she alone could sense, inasmuch as no other person present seemed to be troubled by it. She thought, "This is absurd. I must be tired. I'm not used to such late hours. I don't usually feel like this. I like it here."

She glanced over her shoulder and observed two people coming along the corridor, a man, small and slender and dark, and a woman, taller than he, with hair that shone black under the subdued light. In contrast she wore emerald green and red, and her fingers and wrists were overlaid with jewelry. Walking with assurance, she presented an arresting figure indeed, and completely eclipsed the little man at her side, whom, upon closer inspection, Chris recognized as Señor

Vasquez. Recovering slowly from the first shock of the green and red ensemble, she said, "Good evening," and smiled. The little man returned the smile and bowed with beautiful grace, and the woman said, "Charming place you have here. Could you get us a table near the orchestra?"

Her voice was deep and rather hoarse, but Chris was hardly aware of it. Across her mind had just flashed the thought that she had seen this woman somewhere before, somewhere bereft of her heavy make-up and garish toilet. She had been wearing . . . now what was it she had been wearing? A white overall. That was it. But her hands had been the same, long and thin, with the same pointed red finger-nails. Mechanically she said, "Certainly, madam. Will you come this way?" and conducted them round the edge of the dance floor to a small table as near to the orchestra as was possible without the occupants becoming deafened. They sat down, and from the background a waiter appeared and took possession of them. Chris turned away and retraced her steps, her head bent in thought. Sling was standing in the doorway. He said, as she drew abreast of him, "Vasquez's changing his ways. He usually goes in for blondes, young and unsophisticated."

She asked absent-mindedly, "What exactly are you talking about?"

"Vasquez. The little one you've just parked beside the melody-makers. You know him, don't you?"

He glanced across at the table she had recently left, and her eyes followed the direction of his gaze. She said, "Not particularly. I spoke to him the other evening."

"You worked at the Hotel Rouen, didn't you? And Señor Vasquez has a suite there, a large suite, so I'm told, with extremely modern conveniences."

"So he has." She continued to look at the little man, who was now engaged in a three-sided conversation with his companion and the wine waiter. "I didn't recognize him before. How stupid of me. But then he's not been there very long."

She turned to find him watching her narrowly.

"I don't think you're stupid," he said. "I believe you can

be pretty bright when you like. Funny you shouldn't have recognized the Señor. He knows you all right, by the way he was grinning fit to crack his clock."

"There's nothing particularly funny about that. One meets so many people. Do you know the woman he's with?"

"Never seen her before to-night. Name of Magda Schutte. Married, if the title of 'Mrs' is anything to go by. He brought her in as a guest. Why, d'you know her?"

"No . . . that is, I've seen her before somewhere, but I can't think where."

"Hotel Rouen?" Sling hazarded.

"No, not there. Not anywhere like that. She didn't look a bit like she does now."

"That must have been a relief. Did you ever see anything like those colours? Vasquez'll have to wear spectacles after to-night."

"You're not very complimentary," she said, and he laughed.

"I don't have to be. And when I see a woman looking as if she'd got dressed in the dark I don't hesitate to mention it. Where did you say you'd seen her? They're very interested in you."

"I can't remember. And what makes you think they've noticed me at all? People don't usually notice a receptionist."

"Depends on the receptionist," he said. "As soon as you left their table Vasquez said something to her about you, and she nodded, and they both stared after you, and I'll lay any odds they've been talking about you ever since."

She was suddenly angry again and moved to pass him. She said, "I think you're just a little too imaginative. And your flair for interesting yourself in other people's business is amazing."

A party of young men and women was bearing down upon them. One of the latter called out, "Sling! My dear, we've been positively combing the place for you. Come and lift a glass."

"I haven't the strength," he said. "You'll have to lift it for me," and they seized and bore him off to the cocktail bar. Chris watched them go, and was walking slowly back along

the corridor when she was joined by Mrs Connolly, resplendent in black velvet and pearls.

"There you are, my dear." The older woman smiled with her customary friendly charm. "How are you getting on? But I don't have to ask you that. You're doing splendidly. I was saying to Michael this morning. . . . Oh, what is it *now*?" She paused with dramatic exasperation as Michael burst out of his office, face aflame with indignation, his one eye glaring ferociously.

"What is it?" he repeated. "Are ye after asking me what it is? It's the dog, then. And what has he done? It's a catastrophe, that's what I'm tellin' ye, a catastrophe."

"What is, Michael? Do try to be more explicit."

He stood there, his arms hanging limply, looking as if he were about to have a fit. She pushed past him and went into the office, and Chris and Michael followed. Upon the carpet lay a brandy bottle, three-quarters empty, surrounded by a wet stain, which shone under the electric light. The dog was wandering about the room with staggering gait, his eyes dreamy. Mrs Connolly exclaimed, "Michael! How careless of you. To leave a bottle of brandy here with a dog about the place. It'll probably poison him."

"I hope it does," he said. "I hope it rots his guts." And he went across and, picking up the bottle, regarded the remainder of its contents with very real affection. Mrs Connolly went on, "I really can't think how we're going to explain this to Mrs Montmorency. After all, she did leave the animal in our care. And to find him *intoxicated*. . . ."

Carioca was beginning to run round in circles, first one way and then the other, as if trying to live up to his name. Chris said, "Shall I go and break it to her, Mrs Connolly? Gently, of course."

"Would you, my dear? That's very thoughtful of you. Yes, I think it might be better, coming from you. Just tell her the dog is behaving in a peculiar way, and we would be grateful if she could come and collect him."

"And if she doesn't like it," Michael added, "you can tell her that this is a club, not a so-and-so kennels."

He was accustomed to moderate his language in the

presence of ladies, particularly if one of them happened to be his wife. Chris departed to seek out the dog's proud owner, who occupied a table with her husband, a tall, thin man with an apologetic smile. Mrs Montmorency was inclined to heavy maternal anxiety on hearing the sad news. She discarded her table napkin and rose to her six feet of splendidly upholstered height. She said, "Of course I'll come at once. Thank you for acting so promptly. I'd never forgive myself if anything happened to poor darling Carioca. Egbert, you must settle the bill and then come and help me take him out to the car. We should never have brought him, I suppose, but then he does so hate being left alone, poor sweet."

Her duty done, Chris left them to work out the problem between them. Passing the orchestra, which was having a lot of fun with a new tango, she glanced across to Señor Vasquez's table, and observed that he was now sitting alone. Furthermore, he was smiling and beckoning to her. She went over, and he rose and bowed. He said, "I believe you've forgotten me, Miss Page."

"No, I remember you perfectly, Señor Vasquez." Her smile had become somewhat mechanical. "But one meets so many people, and I did not immediately recognize you."

"Of course. You like it here?"

"Oh, yes. Very much. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Not just now. You are busy. I can see that. But when you have a little time, I would like to talk with you."

She looked somewhat taken aback, and he added quickly, "Please do not be alarmed. I am not in the habit of making assignations with young ladies." Either he was a liar or Sling had been exaggerating. At the moment she felt partial to neither of them. He went on, "But I must not detain you now. Some other time you will, perhaps, spare me a few minutes. I shall be coming in again. The food here is good, and the wine. . . ." He made a sweeping gesture that nearly wrought havoc among the table appointments.

"We shall always be happy to welcome you, Señor," she said, and moved away with as much speed as politeness allowed. Vasquez's companion, who was at that moment returning to their table, gave her a brief smile in passing, and

again Chris was pestered by unsatisfied memory as to where she had seen that smile before. It was ridiculous to let the thing bother her. In the past year she had met hundreds of people, any number of whom she might encounter again without being able to identify them. Why she should be so concerned over this one she could not imagine. And yet throughout the whole of that evening she could not put the matter out of her mind.

CHAPTER V

THE Tilbury case had been officially closed, leaving Frank Flash free to return to the many other affairs that pressed for his attention. But although such freedom was very welcome at the present time, his meticulous, probing mind was still far from satisfied. He had been forced, through sheer lack of evidence, to discontinue his search for some person or persons unknown, and to accept, at least for the time being, the verdict of "natural causes" returned by the coroner. But he had the feeling that somehow, sometime, he would, in the course of his duties, run across something that would reopen the whole issue, and then he would not be found slacking.

Meanwhile he had much to occupy his days, and quite often his nights. The art treasure thefts had not yet been traced home to their perpetrators, and until such time as they were his life could not be properly called his own. It was a good job, he reflected one cold evening in the second week of January, that he had never married. Otherwise he would have forgotten by now what his wife looked like. It was late, and he and Detective-Sergeant Waygood were speeding as fast as possible through London's traffic to a certain rendezvous in the heart of Soho. They had been heartened a little earlier by a report received from the attendant at the Venner Art Galleries, stating that he had just seen the young man whom he suspected of the recent theft there entering a club. The attendant, white-haired, conscientious, and unshakable

in his determination to retrieve the stolen vase, was not likely to prove the most reliable of informants, but the fact that he had mentioned the Carnival Club was sufficient to demand some definite action.

The Carnival, situated in Minton Street, a turning off Soho Square, was known to the police as a meeting-place for certain members of the criminal classes, either already on their 'wanted' list, or definitely headed that way. It had proved quite often in the past a useful hunting-ground to Flash, and he saw no reason why it should not prove so again. At least he hoped so. In the matter of sheer routine work, he had already done all he could. It was high time luck favoured him.

The attendant, old and small and fragile, with a raincoat turned up to his ears—for the night was wet as well as cold—awaited them in a darkened doorway exactly opposite the club premises. He welcomed them with pleasure and just a touch of excitement on his wizened face. Thief-chasing was not a pastime that had hitherto touched his well-ordered existence.

"I'm going to enjoy this," he said. "I wouldn't miss it for worlds. The young devil. Thinking he could walk in and walk out again like that, without me having a bit of a suspicion. And me an old soldier, too. Glad to see you've brought some one with you, sir. This young feller's as likely to prove awkward as not."

Waygood almost laughed. The idea of his superior arresting some unknown young man, wafting him off to Scotland Yard, charging him, and thereby clearing the whole business, amused him, in a dour kind of way. But it was not the right sort of night for hilarity. He stood to one side, unmindful of the cold rain, awaiting Flash's instructions. The latter said, "I think we'll stay right here. It's as good a place as any." He turned on his torch and inspected with approval the cover afforded by the shop front. The lights from the Carnival Club illuminated the opposite pavement, but their side was in comparative darkness, the nearest light coming from a lamp-post some twenty yards away. "Step in, Waygood. No sense in getting any wetter than you need in this blasted climate."

The three of them took a leaning position well under cover and waited. The old man said, "But aren't we going in after him? I thought you were going to arrest him. He might get out the back way or something, and then where will we be?"

"There's no back way to the Carnival," Flash said. "Unless he climbs over the roof. And he's not likely to do that as he doesn't know we're here. All I'm asking you to do is to identify this young man as he comes out. He's got to come out some time, hasn't he?"

"I suppose so." The old man sounded doubtful, as if he suspected such people of having supernatural powers. "But he's been in there quite a time already. You see, gentlemen, I was on my way to visit my sister-in-law—she's got a shop in Rupert Street, been there for years—and I took a short cut this way from Oxford Street. When who do I see but this young man walking in front of me? I'd know his walk anywhere. But that didn't satisfy me, so I went on fast and passed him, and then I stopped, like I was looking in a shop window, and looked back. And it was him all right. Well, then he passed me, see, and I followed him, and in he went to this club. Well, I thought, this is where I get on to Scotland Yard. And I did. There's a box just up the road, you can see it from here, and all the time I was phoning I kept an eye on this club, and a few people went in, but no one came out. So he must be in there now. See what I mean?"

Flash saw what he meant, and said so. Furthermore, he nurtured a certain admiration for the old fellow's astuteness, but he was not in the mood for handing out bouquets. Time enough, he thought, if this came to anything. As likely as not the young man in question would turn out to be as innocent as a babe, and they would be back exactly where they started.

They waited. They waited a very long time. People went into the Carnival Club, and other people came out, and still the old man failed to recognize any of them. Music filtered across to them, raucous dance music, intermingled with the sound of voices and laughter. Farther along Minton Street, on the same side as the Carnival but about ten doors nearer to the square, Flash could see the side entrance to Connolly's. He wished he was in there now. Good old Michael. A wily

bird, but a damned good sort when it came to handing out drinks.

He was becoming restive, and beginning mentally to curse all worthy old gentlemen with a flair for detective work, when the door of the Carnival opened once more and a solitary figure stepped into the light, a young man whose hair showed fair and shining even at that distance. At the same time the old gentleman clutched the detective's arm and hissed into his ear, "That's him! So help me, if I never move from this spot that's the young man you're after."

As far as they could see, their suspect was not dressed 'very arty' on this occasion. He was wearing a dark suit, a raincoat, and a black slouch hat, and he walked rapidly in the direction of Soho Square. Flash said, "Right. We'll get after him and let you know what happens. Meanwhile, don't mention this to a soul."

"Not a soul," the old man repeated, rubbing his hands in glee, and they went off down the road at a fair pace, leaving him to enjoy his triumph. At the end of the street the young man hesitated, then beckoned a passing taxi. Before entering the vehicle he gave a casual glance round, but the two men tailing him were already under cover, and he saw no one. But before the taxi had moved away Waygood had already darted out and leapt upon the running-board of another approaching along Minton Street, and within a few seconds they were inside and driving rapidly behind the tail-light of their quarry. With a simultaneous sigh they relaxed in their respective corners, and lighted cigarettes. Flash said presently, "Did you recognize him?"

Waygood flicked cigarette-ash out of the window and frowned.

"No. Can't say I did."

"Pete Jennings. Must be about nineteen now, very good-looking youngster. Only son of Miriam Jennings. She's doing a stretch for shoplifting. Pretty expensive tastes, Mrs Jennings always had. Nothing but the best for her. Pete went to a good school, and we've nothing against him, so far. I thought she was training him to the straight and narrow. But if our old geezer is right it must be in the blood. We

seem to be heading for the Euston Road. And not a very nice part of it, either. At a guess, I'd say Pete is out of funds."

The street into which they eventually turned was certainly not attractive. It was dim and dirty and haunted by smells and noises of strange variety. There was little sign of life apart from a stray cat delving into a garbage-can. The driver of their taxi had his instructions. As the one in front swept round the corner of a smaller turning, their own vehicle went right past and stopped, and the two men were out in a second, paid off the driver, and reached the side turning in time to see the first taxi moving off, and its late occupant ascending the stairs of a house midway down the street.

They gave him time to reach the top and enter, before approaching with some caution. The building proved to be an hotel of dubious appearance, one of a row of similar dwellings, each with its name painted across the frosted glass top of the outer door, illuminated by a dim light within. The one into which Pete Jennings had disappeared was called the "Myston." They withdrew into the shadows on the opposite side of the road and waited. Nothing startling occurred. A man approached from the left and went up the steps of another hotel a few doors down and entered. A dog came slinking by, limping on one foot. Near at hand some one switched on a radio set. Pete did not appear to be contemplating further nocturnal wanderings. Flash said at last, "I take it that's where he lives. Now I want you to keep an eye on him. I'll send you down a couple of men to help out. We can't fix anything on him for the moment. If he pinched that vase he'll probably have ditched it by now, and the Carnival Club is as good a place to start nosing around as anywhere. I've an idea he didn't go there this evening for his health, or because he was lonely."

"What d'you want me to do if he gets busy again?" Way-good asked.

"Just keep an eye on him. But don't let him see you. If he's in on this game I'll bet ten pounds to a penny he's not working alone. And I don't want the rest of them, whoever they are, to get the breeze up."

He left Waygood only just reconciled to his dismal task, rang up headquarters from the nearest telephone box and gave his instructions, and took a taxi back to the Carnival Club. It was of no use, at this stage, to try to get any particulars on Pete in the orthodox way. The Criminal Record Office had no data, inasmuch as he had never shown any criminal leanings or any sign whatsoever that his future would not be a law-abiding one. But if he were anything like his mother. . . .

The Carnival Club was still in full swing when Flash entered, neither did his arrival cause any particular stir. He was known there, having had occasion to drop in from time to time, but his visits did not always portend an unfortunate end to their evening's amusement for one or more of the denizens. Sometimes he called in merely as a matter of routine, to drink a glass of beer at the bar, have a chat with the proprietor, and, incidentally, to pick up odd scraps of information that later might prove useful. The risk of alcoholic poisoning—for the beer at the Carnival was as notorious as its reputation—had always seemed to Flash to be well worth while. In any case his stomach, over the years, had achieved a hardiness not easily upset.

The atmosphere, after the cold freshness of the air without, came as a shock to the lungs, causing the eyes to smart and the throat to contract in protest. Having regard to the limited amount of air space, the room should not have contained more than a dozen people, but fully five times that number had squeezed in somehow, with the result that there floated between them clouds of drifting smoke, thick as a London fog. Even the glasses, on tables, on the counter, and held between moist hands, had become misted over, and the mirrors on the walls were completely obscured.

Flash, who never stood on ceremony unless he felt something might be gained by it, shouldered his way across the floor, where densely packed couples clasped each other lovingly and danced with heated enthusiasm, if no great skill. The floor was, in fact, so small that one couple alone would have found their movements necessarily restricted. At the bar a motley collection sat and lolled and leaned, and tried to make themselves heard above the determined raucousness of

the band. It was a grim contest, but the band, although numbering only three, was winning hands down.

Over the bar presided a young lady with a mass of corn-coloured curls piled high on her head, and so much lipstick on her mouth that it had encroached upon her teeth, causing them to show pink when she smiled, which was fairly often. Her figure, despite its voluptuous accumulation of youthful fat, was nimble enough to move rapidly to and fro in the service of her customers, and her strident voice was never tired of telling them, in a good-tempered kind of way, that she had only one pair of hands. Sighting Flash, who stood head and shoulders above most of his competitors, she threw him a smile, took his order, and slapped it down in front of him. The beer was warm and inclined to stickiness, and did nothing to aid a throat parched by the thickness of the atmosphere. Flash drank about half of it before putting it down in disgust and lighting a cigarette. Leaning an elbow on the bar, he glanced casually round at the dim sea of faces about him. Quite a large percentage of them he knew by sight and name, but they all appeared to be very much engrossed in their pursuits. One or two had left quietly a few minutes after his arrival.

From the inner premises a man came out, walking with a slight shuffle, a man thick-set and solid-looking, with a lot of dark hair growing low on his forehead, and snapping black eyes that darted to and fro and missed nothing. Josh Ellis was not an attractive personality, and would certainly not have taken full marks for intelligence on appearance alone. An old hand at the overcrowded profession of larceny, he was, according to police records, now a reformed character, and lived solely by the profits accruing from the club, which were not inconsiderable. But regarding the completeness of his reformation Flash nurtured very strong doubts. What better position could he have, in contact with so many criminal elements, for doing a little receiving on the side? Not that he would be likely to handle big stuff, for even in his heyday he had never been anything more than a petty crook. Neither would the big fellows, either receivers or buyers, be likely to patronize a place with a reputation like the Carnival. But

Josh was well known to be close as an oyster and crafty as they come, and could prove very useful, at a pinch, in the role of contact man.

With one sweep of his hairy hand Ellis cleared a place on the counter and leaned heavily upon it, and greeted Flash with a well-feigned show of heartiness.

"Hallo, Inspector. Treat to see you. What are you drinkin'?"

The coy smile vanished from the face of the little lady with the golden curls, and was replaced by a frosty look. She turned away to bestow her coveted attention upon some one else. Flash said, "Thanks, Josh. But I've got one already, and it's poisoning me. How's business?"

The man grinned.

"Must have your little joke. But you're the only one complainin'. Look at 'em." He leaned farther across the bar, the better to view his drink-sodden clientele, and Flash stepped back a pace. The man's breath was almost pure alcohol, and there were limits to what he was prepared to suffer. "It's like this night after night. Never slackens off. When I retired I said to myself, 'Now for a nice bit of rest,' but I'm tellin' you straight, they work me somethin' cruel."

For a man who had done his share of hard labour this was good, but Flash decided tactfully to let it pass. Josh went on, "Been catchin' all the mugs, as per usual? Whenever I lose a client, I always say to myself, 'I'll bet that's Mr Flash up to his tricks again.'"

"You flatter me," Flash said. "As a matter of fact, I'm taking a little holiday."

Josh Ellis guffawed.

"That's a good one, that is. You takin' a holiday. I bet when you can't sleep you count poor mugs goin' into chokey, same as some folk count sheep."

A party to the left of the band was reaching a state of hilarity that could be heard even above the general din. A heavy scowl settled on the face of the proprietor. He said, "Excuse me. I'll have to ask them ladies and gentlemen to pipe down. Can't have that sort of thing goin' on here. What will people think?"

He heaved his massive body past the little barmaid, lifted the flap, and made his way in solemn majesty across the room. A small man in an old suit and cloth cap, who had just procured himself a glass of beer, jerked it to his lips, and in doing so his elbow knocked against Flash's shoulder. His watery eyes slithered sideways and he grinned apologetically, showing broken, blackened teeth. He muttered, "Sorry, guv. Didn't mean to knock yer. But there ain't room to spit in this blisterin' 'ole."

He finished his beer in one draught, wiped his mouth with a dirty hand, hiccoughed twice, and departed. Josh Ellis returned, slammed down the flap, glared all round, and took up his former position. There was a temporary lull in the confused medley of sounds. Flash said, "Well, I must be kicking off. It's long past my bedtime."

"You haven't finished your beer," Josh reminded him.

"I'm relying on you to keep it for me. I might be feeling stronger next time. Cheerio."

He went out, turned left and walked unhurriedly into Greek Street, aware that behind him shambling footsteps were following his. He entered the first public bar he came to, and, gratified to see that it was almost empty, ordered a pint of bitter. The door opened, and the little man with the watery eyes came in and walked furtively to the counter. No one appeared to notice him. The barmaid had retired to fetch something from the saloon. He slewed his mouth sideways and murmured, "Everythin' all right, guv?"

"Could be better," Flash said. "What'll you have?"

"Thanks, guv. I don't mind. Same as you."

Flash gave the order when the barmaid returned, and they carried their drinks to a rough table at the far end of the bar. The little man said, "Was you lookin' for some one, guv?"

Even under artificial light he was an obnoxious-looking person, with permanently wet eyes and nose and a voice that whined, although it was not much more than a whisper. But he had been useful to Flash on more than one occasion. The latter said, "Not particularly. I just like to drop in and see old friends. He's turned into a fine lad, Pete Jennings, hasn't he? His mother must be proud of him."

"Pete?" The little man blinked. "'E weren't there to-night, guv. Least, not when you was. 'E went early."

"Wasn't that him standing by the bar?" Flash asked, feigning surprise and hoping that it registered. "The tall, fair young man, talking to the barmaid?"

The little man expectorated with precision and contempt into the nearest spittoon.

"That weren't Pete. 'E's a nob, is Pete Jennings. 'E don't come to these 'ere low-life joints. Least, 'e didn't used to. But I seen 'im there twice now. Always nice and friendly, is Pete, but keeps 'imself to 'imself. A real nob."

"You surprise me," Flash said. "I could have sworn that was him at the bar. It just shows you we all have our limitations. When did you say you first saw him there?"

"Monday was a fortnight. I was 'angin' around, 'avin' a bit of a think, and in comes Pete, an' 'e stood us all drinks. First time we see'd 'im since 'e left school, see? And Josh says, 'Comin' in over New Year, Pete?' and 'e says 'e might, and 'e might not. Course, 'e didn't. Reckon 'e 'ad somewheres better to go than Josh's place. In with the nobs, 'e is."

"He is, eh? Well, that's a good job for him. He wouldn't want to land up like his mother did. Can you go another?"

"Try me, guv," the little man said, with child-like simplicity.

When Flash left eventually, his companion was sitting indulging in maudlin dreams over his fourth pint. His business in that district temporarily completed, Flash hailed a taxi and drove straight to the Yard, where a telephone message from Waygood awaited him. It ran, "Our friend has just moved out, but he is well covered. I'm waiting where I was before until you come along." That was the best of Waygood. He never hesitated to act promptly, yet always with discretion. Flash returned to the Myston Hotel in Rowley Street as fast as he could, to find the detective-sergeant hovering under cover on the opposite side of the road. He was a cheerful young man, who took this kind of job with as much philosophy as it is possible to muster on a wet and wintry night. He said, "Pete moved out about an hour ago. He must have phoned for a taxi, because it came up to the door and he got in,

plus a couple of large suit-cases. I left one man here, just in case, and the other came along with me. We tailed Pete to a block of flats in Hammersmith, Caterham Court. It's a pretty classy place and he's taken a flat there, so I gather he's in funds. I left the other man there, keeping his eye on things, and came straight back, after I telephoned the Yard. I thought you'd want to do a bit of scouting."

"You thought right," Flash said. "Where's Rawlings now?"

"I sent him over to Hammersmith. They can take turn and turn about. Pete might decide to move again, you never know."

"Good. We've got to keep tapes on that young man until we get this thing cleared up. Caterham Court, eh? It's certainly a step up from Rowley Street. Now I think we'll take a look at his old digs. Has anyone been in or come out since he left?"

"Not a sign of anyone. It's been like a desert island around here for the last twenty minutes."

The proprietress of the Myston made no particular objection to their request. It would seem as if contact with the police was not unknown to her, for she shrugged her massive shoulders and showed them up three flights of dreary stairs to a room smallish and not overclean. She was enormously fat, with many chins and an expression of permanent weariness, and she wore a somewhat stained blue dress that looked as if it would split if she partook of one more meal. Her voice was coarse and her accent Scandinavian. Mr Jennings, she said, had been with her for about a month. He was a nice young man and paid his bills promptly. She knew nothing of his business, and her complete indifference suggested that she cared less.

Their search was not a long one, since the room was only barely furnished, the wardrobe and chest of drawers empty, the bed bare of any covering. It would appear that the proprietress did not trust any of her guests sufficiently to leave linen on the bed when they were in the throes of departure. Fortunately, she was not so hasty in her clearing of the waste-paper basket, which was crammed full of the

odds and ends that a person discards when moving in a hurry—old bills, carelessly torn through, magazines, a well-worn pair of slippers, a broken comb, and a sheaf of newspapers. It was the last that attracted Flash's attention, for they were all copies of the *Morning Envoy* of consecutive dates, beginning from the first week in December and continuing until the 28th of that month. The one bearing the last date was folded at the page on which was printed the personal column advertisements, one of which was ringed round in pencil. Flash read it through with interest:

"Before you leave London, be sure to visit the Art Treasures Emporium. Gifts of undermiable beauty at reasonable prices. Fagin's Mews, Mayfair."

"Now that," he said, "is what I call a really well-worded advert. It got Pete, anyway. I wonder just how long he's been interested in art?"

CHAPTER VI

FLASH was crouched over his desk the following day, methodically sorting newspaper cuttings, when there came a knock at the door, and Detective-Inspector Olsen walked in. Flash glanced up, said, "Hallo, Fred. Shan't be a minute. Take a seat," and went on with the task in hand. Olsen sat down and lighted a cigarette. In his middle thirties, with red hair and greenish eyes, he was sufficiently good-looking to have got himself a job in motion pictures had he not nurtured a leaning towards the police force. It was said that he came from wealthy stock and could have done better for himself, but the point did not seem to bother him. A perpetual smile lurked at the corners of his good-humoured mouth, as if he found life a very amusing game indeed. He said, "Don't mind me. The Chief said I might look in and see if I could give you a hand. I'm clear at the moment."

Flash put aside his work and straightened himself, easing the crick in his neck. He had been sitting there a very long time.

"You came at the right minute," he said. "I was about to burst into tears."

"As bad as that?"

"Could be worse, I suppose. But you know how it is. Just as you're expecting some one to make a certain move they go and do something else, just to fool you."

Olsen grinned.

"Sounds complicated. Anything I can do to help?"

"Plenty, if you're serious. Just half a minute while I finish sorting this lot."

"What about a spot of lunch?" Olsen suggested. "On me. I'm feeling expansive."

"It's an idea," Flash agreed, busy once more. "I haven't lunched for about five days. I never think of it until it's too late. I suppose you're feeling pretty good, having just tucked the Ferenzi brothers into their cots?"

"So-so. But I'll feel better still with something inside me. I don't believe in this austerity business. A full stomach makes a fertile brain, in my opinion."

"Maybe that's what's wrong with me. Here, take a look at this while I get cleaned up."

And he passed a dossier over to the other side of the desk and rose with a general air of relief. He liked Olsen, had worked with him on previous cases and never found him anything but helpful. The two detectives went presently to a small restaurant just off the Strand, where the food was good and the clientele not so large as to overshadow the service. They ordered a substantial lunch, and under the influence of Olsen's cheerful companionship Flash felt considerably better. He said, "Did you read through any of those advertisements I was sorting?"

"A few. They all seemed to be trying to put over the same idea, that the Art Treasures Emporium is *the* centre of the artistic world. Personally, I never thought much of the place, but I'm probably in the minority."

"You know it, then?"

"I've been there once or twice. In an unofficial capacity, of course. But I didn't consider any of their stuff was worth a light."

In a small way Olsen was something of a collector. His means did not permit him to indulge his tastes extensively, but his opinions were based upon a very real interest and close study. Flash regarded him thoughtfully. He said, "I'm glad you think that. Because I've an idea that shop is just a blind."

"For what?"

"Something much bigger. Who did you see there?"

"A young woman, rather pretty. She didn't seem to care whether she served me or not, and as I didn't see anything there to shout about, I wrote it off."

"I'd like you to do something for me," Flash said. "I'd like you to pay another visit, between two and three this afternoon if you can manage it. Miss Montague, the blonde, will be at lunch then, and you'll see Mr Budd. Believe me, that's worth a visit in itself. Go in looking expensive, and give him the impression that money is no object. You're prepared to buy the British Museum, if it takes your fancy. And if you can talk with a slightly foreign accent, so much the better."

Olsen laughed.

"I'll be glad to. I like nosing round these places, although I must say that one struck me as a bit below par. But what's the idea behind it? Why don't you go yourself?"

"I've been there already, so they know me. In any case, I look like a policeman, you don't."

"You think they're up to something, then?"

"I don't know. It's only half an idea. Look, Fred, this is the situation, as far as I've been able to piece it together. On the twenty-ninth December last some one knocked off a vase from the Venner Galleries. Apparently it's a pretty rare specimen, worth a lot, although from the pictures I've seen it doesn't look much. But then these things never do, to me. I'd just as soon pick one up at a junk sale for half a crown. But that's beside the point. This affair caused a bit of a stir, as you know. It's not the first job of its kind that's been pulled, and so far we haven't pinched anyone. All right. The attendant at the Venner Galleries suspected a young man he saw hanging round the place. We didn't think much of that, until last night when he saw the same young man

entering the Carnival Club. Then we thought quite a bit. Waygood and I went over there, and our suspect turned out to be Pete Jennings, son of Miriam, now doing a stretch in Holloway. Well, that's not much to go by, but a while later Pete moved out of his digs in Rowley Street, off the Euston Road, and if you know that street you'll also know that no one lives there if they've got the price of anything better on them. Pete took a taxi and went straight over to Caterham Court, Hammersmith, where he's now living in style in a nice flat all to himself. Now where did he get that money? I'll take a bet with anyone he didn't work for it, and no one is just handing it out for charity in these hard times.

"And that's not all. In his old digs we found copies of the *Morning Envoy*, covering the whole of the time he'd been there, and in the latest edition there was one of these Emporium personal ads. ringed round. It said something like, 'Before you leave London, be sure to visit the Art Treasures Emporium and buy a lovely gift for Auntie.' You know the kind of thing. And the date was the twenty-eighth December, the day before that infernal robbery was committed. Furthermore, if my information is correct, he visited the Carnival on the evening of that day and stood every one drinks, which suggests that he was feeling pretty good and flush.

"Now I'm prepared to admit that Pete *may* have come into a fortune or got his money some other way within the law, that he may have called at the Carnival for the sake of somewhere to go, although he's not in the habit of going there, and that he may have intended visiting the Emporium, or did go there, because he wanted to buy something."

"The way you say that you don't think anything of the kind."

"No. And I'll tell you why. I've dug up copies of the *Envoy* for the past two years—that's going back six months before these robberies started—and I find that the Emporium adverts. have appeared regularly twice a week. Now the one in which Pete was interested came out the day before that vase vanished, and, comparing it with those appearing the day before previous robberies of the same kind, I discover that they invariably begin with the letter A or the letter B.

The wording, too, is always the same. One begins, 'A beautiful collection of ivories, jades, etc.,' and the other, 'Before you leave London . . .' and so on. And the significant thing is that neither of these advertisements is ever used except the day before a robbery takes place, and they never appeared at all up to the time the first haul was made."

"Code?" Olsen said. He was leaning forward, cigarette in hand, his coffee growing cold at his elbow.

"For the moment I'm assuming so. The Emporium itself is all right; they buy stuff and sell it in the ordinary way, and there's nothing out of order in their books. I've been into all that. But there's also nothing to stop them using the shop as a cover for these art robberies. That way they would be in a nice position to contact collectors, or anyone sufficiently unscrupulous as to buy the stuff—probably for shipment abroad. The idea of the personal adverts. appearing regularly would be two-sided, in the first place to attract a few customers for the legitimate business, and secondly to distract attention from the adverts. that act as a code signal to whoever is going to pull the job. That way they avoid any risk by correspondence or telephone calls. And if I'm right, A is the code letter for one of their men and B for the other, who is probably Pete."

"So that when he saw the advertisement beginning with B, and the usual wording, he knew he'd got a job to do. But why should he have kept the newspapers by him?"

Flash shrugged.

"You know how those things accumulate if you take them every day. I suppose they just hung around until he was moving, and then he ditched the lot. Pretty careless of him, but he's only a kid and new to the game."

"It all sounds reasonable," Olsen said. "By the way, who is this nebulous 'they' you keep talking about?"

"If I knew that I shouldn't be sitting here. But there must be more than one operating this scheme, besides the mug who does the donkey-work. There's the organizer—and believe me, he must be a smart one to have got away with it so long—the buyers of the stuff, probably several of them, and I imagine there's some one who acts as go-between. Because I can't bring myself to believe that, assuming I'm right so far,

when Pete saw the advert. he just strolled round to the Emporium, got his instructions, and strolled back later with the goods. If they took risks like that we'd have had them by now."

"Who owns this Emporium?" Olsen asked, absent-mindedly drinking his cold coffee and lighting a further cigarette.

"A man named Tilbury did own it. Alfred Tilbury, apparently quite above-board. But he died on New Year's Eve, and in mysterious circumstances. I was on that case, too, but had to shelve it for lack of evidence. But I think I'm beginning to get some new ideas about it."

"You mean one of this arty gang might have had a down on him?"

"Exactly. Or there's still his wife. She inherited all his property, including the business, and she told me she intended to sell it. Now, if Tilbury was this bright boy who's been causing us so much trouble, and she knew about it, she may have wanted to cut out altogether. She told me as much, not that he was a crook, of course, but that she had often tried to persuade him to sell the Emporium. Well, perhaps she decided to have him put out of his misery so that she could go her own way. She admitted that she wasn't very fond of him."

"You'd have a job to prove it," Olsen said. "If she's as calculating as that she'll have an alibi as solid as the Bank of England."

"She has. She was at a bridge party. But I'm just surmising. She may not have known anything about Tilbury's little tricks. She may have got him done in just for the fun of it. On the other hand, she's probably quite innocent and wouldn't harm a rabbit. But how can you tell? She's a peculiar woman."

"Most women are," Olsen said. "What about Pete? Where was he on New Year's Eve?"

"I don't know. I've not looked into it yet. But I don't think it's very important. I'd stake anything that Pete's not a killer, whatever else he's been up to."

"And these other two who worked for Tilbury?"

"Oh, those. Well, I think Miss Montague's all right. She's

the sort of girl who takes up a job like that until she gets married, and then never thinks of it again. I'm not so sure about Mr Budd. I'll be glad to have your opinion."

Olsen looked at his watch.

"Well, if I'm to do anything useful, I'd better be moving. I suppose business is carrying on there as usual, during changes in the administration?"

"Apparently. I must say that neither of them seems to be worrying much, but I suppose you can always land a job in that arty-crafty line."

They parted, Olsen *en route* for the Emporium, and Flash to catch up on various jobs from which the prospect of lunch had inveigled him. He spent a busy afternoon and best part of the evening making a further check on details of the previous robberies, with which he was all too familiar. But now he worked with renewed energy, confident that he had really got his teeth into something at last. Waygood reported that Pete Jennings had made no further move of any importance. But Flash was no longer very concerned with him. Pete was small fry, and could be pulled in any time if the necessary evidence were forthcoming. At the moment there were bigger issues to consider. If, as he suspected, Tilbury had been the brains of the organization he was so intent upon breaking, what would be the next move? Would the whole thing automatically come to an end, or would the rest of them, thinking themselves undetected, carry on under cover of the Emporium, or some other guise? The latter seemed to be the more likely course for them to follow. It was too profitable a business to be abandoned easily. And if that were the case it was a situation where the quarry must be given plenty of rope in order to bring about the desired end. It would not do for them to suspect that there was even one flaw in their arrangements, hence Pete must be temporarily left in peace and happy ignorance that the eye of the law was upon his every movement. The Carnival Club, too, might prove a focal point of interest. But he must go carefully. The slightest false move, the merest hint that he was on to them, and they would go to ground, before he had a chance to settle the thing once and for all time. It was lucky for him that he and Mike

Connolly were old friends. It gave him the opportunity also of putting an unobtrusive foot into Connolly's Club while keeping his eyes and ears wide open. For while he would have staked his life on Michael's respectability, at the same time any haunt of Tilbury's was worth more than a cursory glance in his quest for information.

He had dinner, in a vague kind of way, and arrived at Connolly's early, at least, early by their standards. A few people drifted here and there, and the subdued strains of a fox-trot came from the other end of the corridor as Siegman admitted him and stood hovering uncertainly. Flash said, "If Mr Connolly's here, just tell him I've dropped in for a chat."

"Very good. May I take your hat, sir?"

"No, thanks. I never part with it. I expect that's why I've kept it so long."

He spoke good-humouredly, and failed to see the look of injured pride that crossed Siegman's dour countenance. He was too interested in the young lady who came out of the office on the left-hand side as Siegman walked away and knocked on Michael's door. She was all in black, with a trailing black scarf caught through the gold chain bracelet she wore round one wrist. He thought she looked delightful as she came across to him, smiled, and said, "Good evening. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Good evening to you, miss. I'm just waiting for a word with Mr Connolly."

"Oh, I'm afraid he hasn't arrived yet. But Mrs Connolly is here, if you'd like to see her."

Siegman, abandoning his quest, returned to the cloakroom, where he leaned upon the counter and glowered covertly at the detective. The latter said, "No, don't trouble her. Will Mr Connolly be in later?"

"Any minute, I should think. Will you wait?"

"I'll just step into the bar. You might tell him when he comes in."

"Of course."

She was about to turn away when Sling came along the corridor from the direction of the side entrance. He had a black coat flung carelessly over his evening dress and a cigarette

burning between his fingers. He was whistling softly to himself, but paused at sight of Flash. He said, "Good evening, Inspector. How are you on this cold and dreary night?"

"I'll be all the better for a drink," Flash said, and passed him without too much ceremony and went into the bar. Sling met the girl's surprised glance and laughed.

"Detective-Inspector Flash, C.I.D.," he said. "A determined-looking gentleman, isn't he?"

"Very. But why should he . . . ?"

"Do not tremble, gentle maiden. He comes but to quaff a tumbler with the boss. They're old pals. I believe they met in jail, or some such place. Isn't Mike here yet, then? That man gets worse and worse. I'll have to talk to him severely about it."

"You're not any too early yourself," she pointed out.

"It doesn't do to be too early. People might get the wrong impression. A happy medium is the thing."

He went into Michael's office and shut the door. Siegman, still leaning on the counter, beckoned her across.

"What does that 'tec want?" he asked, in a sibilant whisper, with a sideways glance at Ramon, who was somewhere in the background.

"Nothing in particular. Mr Fitzroberts said that he's one of Mr Connolly's friends."

"That is as may be. But I don't like it. Doesn't do the place any good, having policemen hanging around."

"But he's in plain clothes, Mr Siegman, and if he's a friend of Mr Connolly's. . . ."

"Anyone'd know he was a copper if he was in a winding-sheet," Siegman said contemptuously, and moved to the door as the bell sounded.

In the bar the subject of his annoyance had taken his place and was engrossed in a tall glass of lager. There were only two other people present, a young man and woman who sat at a little table with cocktails in front of them, an imitation palm-tree behind them, and nothing between them but the electric atmosphere of love. The barman leaned in his favourite corner and watched them with interest. Flash sat patiently, savouring the excellence of the lager on his palate

and feeling more optimistic than he had done for some time. Mrs Connolly entered, cast a professional, questing eye round the room, sighted him, and came across immediately.

"Why, Mr Flash," she said, "how very nice to see you."

She said it beautifully, as if he were the one man who could make her evening complete. She had met him in similar circumstances many times, and always welcomed him in the same manner. Flash, at all times a practical man, was not particularly impressed by her affability. But he rose and greeted her as if he were. She said to the barman, "I'll have a small dry sherry, please, Tom," and seated herself upon one of the high chromium-legged stools. She was one of those women who can sit gracefully upon anything.

"Tell me," she said, turning her gleaming smile upon the detective, "how are you getting on?" And she waited for his reply as if her life depended on it.

"So-so. I'm taking a little rest right now, and as I was passing this way I thought I'd drop in and see Mike."

"Of course. You should come in more often." She lowered her voice a trifle. "I was so sorry that your last visit was not a happy one. Michael told me about it. Poor Mr Tilbury. Such an unfortunate affair. I was *most* distressed."

"Naturally." He found talking to Mrs Connolly a trying business. She always gave him the impression that she was acting a part and was determined not to give the slightest clue to her real self, which put a restraint upon her hearers. He added, for want of anything else to say, "How's Michael?"

"Oh, fairly well, thank you. But I've been just a little worried about him lately. He's been rather depressed, and that's not like him, as you know."

She finished her drink and insisted upon ordering another round. People were beginning to arrive. The tables were filling up, and most of the seats at the bar were now taken. Mrs Connolly waved to one or two acquaintances, moved here and there to say a few smiling words to others. She had returned to Flash and was engaged in a homily on the exigencies of club life when a small, dark man appeared in the doorway, glanced round, and was about to withdraw. But she had already seen him.

"Señor Vasquez!" she called. "Aren't you going to take a little *apéritif*?"

He started, somewhat theatrically, Flash thought, and came across to them, smiling. He said, "Mrs Connolly! This is a great pleasure," and bowing, kissed her hand with the reverence usually accorded to royalty. The action seemed to please her, so that for the moment Flash felt very much alone and forgotten. But suddenly recalling her role of hostess, she turned with a smile and made the necessary introduction, adding, "Mr Flash is a *very* old friend of ours. We really see him too seldom."

She was always careful to avoid mentioning his profession in company. Señor Vasquez sighed.

"What a wonderful circle of friends you have, Mrs Connolly. Always surrounded by cheerful, smiling faces. I should deem it an honour if I might consider myself one of their number."

He ordered a dry Martini from the barman, and inquired courteously if they would join him. Mrs Connolly said she would have just a small one, but Flash's "cheerful, smiling face" hastily declined the invitation. He said, "I think I'll just stroll along and see if Mike's shown up yet," and rose and stood looking down a very long way upon the shining dark head of Señor Vasquez.

"Oh, must you go?" Mrs Connolly said. "Yes, I suppose it would be a nice thing to do. Michael will be so pleased to see you. But do drop in again, Mr Flash, and soon. Any time. You know you're always welcome."

He said something he hoped was appropriate, knowing himself to be no match for her in this matter of forced pleasantries, exchanged a brief nod for Señor Vasquez's accomplished bow, and went out, glad to get away from the hot-house atmosphere of the bar and to hear Michael's booming voice at the end of the corridor. The latter turned as he approached, and a slow smile spread over his features. But Mrs Connolly was right. He did not look very happy. He said, "Hallo, Frank. They told me you were here. I was just coming to find you. How's tricks?"

"Trickier than ever," Flash said, and followed him into the

office and shut the door. Mechanically Michael opened the cupboard and produced a bottle of brandy, three-quarters full, and two glasses, which he set upon the table, having first poured out adequate measures. In tacit agreement they sat down and took a long pull, lit cigarettes, and sat back in their respective chairs. But still Michael did not appear at ease, and seemed to be avoiding the eyes of his old and trusted friend. He said at last, "Well, Frank, this is very nice. Quite like old times." But there was no conviction in his voice. Flash said: "Quite. But you're not looking yourself, Michael. Not a bit. I've just been talking to Mrs C. in the bar, and she said the same."

"She did, eh? Well, women get these ideas. It doesn't mean a thing. Lilian's all right, though. Wonderful the way she copes with all these people. Don't know how she does it."

"Wonderful," Flash agreed. "She had one with her just now. Name of Vasquez. Spanish, or some such thing. D'you know him?"

Michael frowned, and ran a hand through his luxuriant hair.

"Not very well. I've talked to him. He comes in now and then. But, of course, I can't know every one personally with a list of members like ours. The first time I ever saw him was New Year's Eve."

He paused as though the memory gave him no great pleasure, and sought to change the subject. Flash was quick to assist him. He asked, "Who's the young lady in black? I've not seen her before."

Michael brightened visibly.

"Miss Page, you mean? Lilian took her on as receptionist and that sort of thing. They get on fine together. I must say it was a surprise to me. Two women like that getting on together. You know what I mean. But Lilian thinks she's all right, and there you are."

He looked slightly apologetic, as if to say when two women make up their minds about anything, what can a man, even a large man, do about it? Flash grinned encouragement. He asked, "Where did she come from?"

"Oh, some hotel or other. The Rouen, in Grosvenor Square."

"Well, I'd say she was a find. I thought you only saw them looking like that on the other side of the pearly gates. And that's not such a bad idea. 'The Pearly Gates' would be a good name for this place, if your Miss Page intends to stay long."

Michael finished his brandy with a convulsive gulp and looked hurt.

"We may make changes every so often," he said. "And I agree that a feminine touch about the place doesn't do any harm. But Connolly's will always be Connolly's, Frank, and don't you forget it."

"I won't," Flash said, and accepted a refill of his glass and drank appreciatively. Michael was certainly a superman when it came to hospitality. But duty was duty, and he could not afford to observe the finer feelings of his host. He said tentatively,:

"Talking of New Year's Eve, you'll be glad to know that I wound up that affair with no harm done to anyone."

Michael's face again reflected gloom.

"So I heard. But I expected no less, Frank. After all, it was quite straightforward, wasn't it?"

"Oh, quite. But one or two things have puzzled me a bit. For instance, Tilbury had a lot of friends, or acquaintances, you might say, but no one knows anything about them. Did any of them ever come here?"

"Well, it'd be difficult to say, off-hand. No one ever gets in here who isn't a friend of one of the members. But that doesn't mean very much when you see them altogether. I've seen Tilbury here with different people, but for the life of me I couldn't remember half their names or faces. But there's Jim Cunningham. He knew Tilbury pretty well, and is one of our regulars. Lilian doesn't like me to call them that. She uses some highfalutin' French word. And this Vasquez. I think he knew Tilbury. Anyway, he came here looking for him on New Year's Eve."

"He did, eh?"

"He did." Again Michael finished his brandy and sought for more. It was beginning to make him feel good, but not so good that he failed to notice the gleam of professional

interest in the detective's eyes. "But don't you try to make anything out of it, Frank. After all, Tilbury's dead and buried, God rest his soul. And there's nothing anyone can do about it now."

"You're right," Flash said, hoping he would be excused the lie in view of the issues that were at stake. "No, not another, thanks. I must be on my way. Promised to look in and see some one on my way home."

"Hope she's waiting up for you," Michael said, with a return to jocularity, and Flash had difficulty in masking his surprise that anyone could associate him with comparative trivialities just then. He must have been playing his part well.

"She will," he said, but there was still a note of constraint in their combined laughter as they went out into the corridor. Miss Page, who was passing at that moment, smiled, and Flash looked after her with renewed interest. Anyone who did not completely fit in with their surroundings was liable to attract his attention just then.

He left, with a promise to return when time and duty permitted, the fulfilment of which, he felt with a certain sadness, would not be entirely welcome. Once in the square, he was moving away when a figure lurched round the corner of Minton Street, stood for a moment swaying in all directions, and then came weaving towards him. A hoarse voice asked, "Got the time on you, sir?"

Flash, recognizing one of the *habitués* of the Carnival Club, said curtly, "Twenty minutes to twelve," and went on his way, while the man staggered off in the opposite direction, whistling, *If You Want to Know the Time, Ask a Policeman*. This did not strike Flash as particularly amusing, but the thought crossed his mind that unobtrusive supervision of the Carnival Club would not be easy. They were a wily, up-and-coming lot, and would need careful handling. Meanwhile, he must look in and see if Olsen had anything useful to report. He walked to Shaftesbury Avenue, took a bus to Southampton Row, and strolled along to the block of flats on the third floor of which his colleague was housed in moderate comfort. Olsen answered the door, and admitted him with his usual cordiality.

"I was about to put you down on the 'missing' list," he said. "Care for some coffee?"

"Thanks. Nothing I'd like more." Flash put his hat on the table and flopped down into an easy chair. "What's the news? Anything good?"

"Good enough," Olsen said, and went out, returning some ten minutes later with the coffee and cups on a tray. Among other things, he had a flair for domesticity. Flash took the proffered cup, stirred in sugar, and relaxed for the first time that day. Olsen said, seating himself in the opposite arm-chair, "I've nothing much to report regarding Budd, I'm afraid. He's a fancy young man, isn't he? But a good salesman. He took a long look at me, and I could almost *feel* him assessing the amount of money I'd got in my pocket, which wasn't such a lot. The first thing I did was to ask to see Tilbury. He looked a bit shaken over that, and, after hedging a while, admitted that his late lamented boss was no longer in the land of the living. I went very quiet, said I was sorry, and so on. Then I went on to hint that I was a collector of no mean status, that I'd met Tilbury at a club, and that he'd told me to call and see him. But I don't think Budd was taken in for a minute. Not that he rumbled me, but I believe he had a pretty good idea that I wasn't in the market for the crown jewels. He did a lot of sales-talk about various odds and ends, and he kept bringing in the word 'inexpensive.' That always gets me down. Why can't these Mayfair boys say 'cheap' when that's what they mean? Anyway, we dithered around for a bit, when who should arrive but Mrs Tilbury, plus a little dark man talking good English with a Spanish accent, and another who could only have been a lawyer——"

"Did you say Spanish?" Flash interrupted.

"I did. But not so fast. I'm coming to that. I didn't cotton on to Mrs Tilbury at first. She was wearing a navy blue coat that looked as if she'd made it herself in an off-moment and an impossible hat with a feather in it, and she might have been anybody. But then they all disappeared into the office and shut the door, and Mr Budd was all at sixes and sevens and lost his train of thought. After a while he admitted that he was a trifle upset because Mrs Tilbury was selling the shop

and he was not sure yet whether he would be requested to move his person elsewhere. That lets him out, I thought, because if he's thrown out on his ear obviously Tilbury's death hasn't done him any good, and his motive for murder is reduced to a minimum. He might have been putting on an act, but I don't think so. He seemed genuinely upset that the Emporium should be turned over to some one else."

"It's the first time he's shown any such symptoms," Flash said. "He didn't appear very put out when I saw him."

"Perhaps he didn't really think, then, that any such contingency would arise. I've often noticed that people in soft jobs never can imagine themselves having to turn out. Anyway, I gave him a large dose of sympathy wrapped up in a little speech on the subject of art and the hopelessness of it in the hands of vandals. And what does he do but confide in me that the vandal in this case is one Dominico Vasquez, a South American, that the deal is practically clinched, that this Vasquez, although he collects bits and pieces, has no real knowledge of art, and that he, Budd, would rather starve than work for such a man."

Very deliberately Flash put down his empty coffee cup and lighted a cigarette. He said, "Vasquez, eh? Coincidence is a wonderful thing. I met him only this evening."

"You did? Are you sure it's the same one? A small man, about five foot four, quietly dressed, with dark hair and eyes and complexion, a gold eye-tooth, and a polite smile? I should say, off-hand, that he was about forty-four."

"The very same," Flash said. "I met him at Connolly's in company with the proprietress." He sat there for a few moments, frowning, staring down at the toe-cap of his shoe where it caught the light. "There can't be two like that about, and with the same name. He was there on New Year's Eve, too, looking for Tilbury. Funny, the way all these people gravitate to Connolly's."

Olsen was busy refilling the coffee-cups. He said, "What's funny about that? They advertise it as London's smartest rendezvous."

"I'm not arguing with them. As long as they don't try to get too smart. I'd hate to think . . . but let's not get ahead of ourselves. What else happened?"

"Nothing very much. Mr Budd seemed anxious to get rid of me, so I went. It's difficult to see, at the moment, just where he fits in. If he's one of the boys we're after and Vasquez's in it too, there doesn't appear to be any reason for him to get upset over a change of administration. On the other hand, if Vasquez's on the square, there's every reason for a cloud of depression, because obviously dividends are going down in future."

Flash nodded.

"We've also got to bear in mind that Budd may be quite above-board, and simply worried because he can see himself having to move. Vasquez may be all right too, but I doubt it. What interests me most is whether he's going to run the business legitimately or not. If he does, then we must assume that with Tilbury the business dies, and all we have to do is to round up the rest of the boys, and girls, if any. I say all, though God knows how long it will take. But if Mr Vasquez thinks he's going to carry on in Tilbury's shoes, then the job should be comparatively easy."

"Should be," Olsen agreed. "And without being too optimistic, I think that's just what is going to happen. There's one thing you haven't told me, though. How did Tilbury die?"

"A seizure. At least, that was the medical view, and I had no reason to disagree with it. But I'd give a lot to discover just what caused his heart to peter out like that. His own doctor said it was liable to happen any time, and I've no doubt he was right, but I can't help feeling that New Year's Eve was a particularly convenient time for some one."

He went on to give a brief summary of the circumstances, including his own subsequent visit to Connolly's, and added, "I'm doing a little checking up on some of the people at that club. I've known Michael for years and I'd trust him with my life, but when it comes to judging character he's not the brightest man in the world." He rose and stretched himself and said, "Well, we'd better get some sleep on it, and I'll see you in the morning. Thanks for the coffee and the help. I'm glad the day wasn't entirely wasted."

"Wasted?" Olsen repeated. "I should rather think not. I haven't shown you my little treasure yet. I hadn't the

heart to come away without it, and, as Mr Budd said, it was quite inexpensive."

He lifted off the broad mantel, from a host of other items, a slim alabaster figure, an object which Flash had not until then observed.

"Charming, isn't it?" he said, holding it carefully silhouetted against the light. "I can just picture that against a background of pea-green."

Flash, recognizing it, shuddered at this tribute to Mr Budd's salesmanship.

"If I told you just where that gives me a pain," he said, "you'd think me vulgar. I'm going home while I'm still in my right mind."

CHAPTER VII

TOWARDS closing time at Connolly's his wife sought Michael in his office, and by the way she closed the door and came over to sit on the arm of his chair, he knew she had something on her mind. She helped herself to a cigarette from the box on the table, and waited only long enough for him to light it before coming straight to the point. She asked, "What did Mr Flash want this time, darling?"

He moved restlessly, and she knew that he was going to try to convince her of something he did not believe himself.

"Nothing special, dear. Except a drink. We had a couple, and a bit of a chat, and he pushed off. Why?"

"That's not all, Michael. You know that. I believe he's trying to ferret out something in connexion with Tilbury's death. Not that I think there's anything to discover, but you know how policemen are. They've nothing better to do than to worry people. But I do wish that if he *must* make himself a nuisance he'd do it on some one else's premises."

"Now, Lilian, you've no need to be so down on Frank. He's all right. He just likes to drop in now and then. I've asked him to. I like to see him."

"Does he have to come here quite so often?" she said

bitterly, and he looked at her in some surprise. "Oh, I know you like him, and I've nothing against him either, but it doesn't do the club any good to have a policeman about the place."

"How's anyone to know he's a policeman?"

"These things get round. Anyway, darling, do what you can to discourage him next time. I don't want anyone to think this is becoming an annexe to Scotland Yard." She rose, yawning slightly, managing to accomplish this without distortion of her carefully made-up face. "I shall go and tidy up now. I'm *very* tired."

She went out, and he looked after her in a puzzled kind of way. There were times when the workings of his wife's mind proved a complete mystery to him. Outside Mrs Connolly encountered Christina, who was in the act of locking her office door. She managed a gracious smile.

"Packing up, Miss Page? That's right, we'll be closing soon. You should really try to get away early once in a while. These late nights are tedious when you're not used to them."

Christina said, smiling no less graciously, "I'm getting into the way of hanging about, I'm afraid. The habit is catching."

"So very true, my dear. I'm sure we should have people camping here all night if I didn't *insist* upon closing promptly. But there's no need for you to stay to the bitter end. Good night."

"Good night, Mrs Connolly," Chris said, and watched her walk majestically across to her private sanctum before making her own way towards the dining-room. Most of the guests had already gone, the band had packed up, and, glancing into the cocktail lounge, she saw the barman closing down for the night. A man came from the direction of the cloakroom and took her gently by the arm. She swung round, and her glance encountered the smiling dark eyes of Señor Vasquez.

"Pardon me, Miss Page," he said, "but are you leaving now?"

"In a little while, yes. Why, is there anything I can do for you?"

"I should like to see you home."

She gave him a long look of inquiry, and he quickly released her arm.

"Now, Miss Page, please put from your mind what you are thinking. I should like very much to talk to you, but for obvious reasons we cannot talk here. But if you would care to take coffee with me, or perhaps some more potent refreshment. . . ."

"I don't think . . ." she began, and paused. Sling had just left the dining-room and was coming towards them. As they stood aside for him to pass he hesitated, surveyed them with a singularly cold stare, and went on. Chris said, "Coffee will suit me very well, Señor. I shall be about ten minutes." "I am honoured. My car is parked on the other side of Minton Street. I will wait for you there."

He bowed and moved away. Leisurely she completed her duties and a careful toilet, looked in and said good night to Michael, dozing in his chair, and to Siegman, who was indulging in a melancholy tirade with Mrs Summers, ruler of the ladies' boudoir. They paused in their verbal castigation of the human species long enough to wish her good night, and Mrs Summers added, "You're late, aren't you, miss? Don't you let them put upon you. The other young lady never used to stay so long."

Christina made some trifling reply, and went quickly out through the side-entrance into the iciness of the early morning. It seemed as if people were always urging her to go home, and she found it somewhat embarrassing. There was only one car in Minton Street, parked close to the kerb on the opposite side, a long, dark car of expensive-looking make. As she approached, Vasquez stepped out and went round to open the off-side door for her. He said, "I was beginning to fear that you had changed your mind."

"I never do that," she said. "It saves such a lot of time and bother if you stick to your decisions."

He nodded gravely, as if her answer pleased him, closed the door, and returned to his seat. He was a good driver, and the car a perfect specimen of its kind, and she was so absorbed in its smooth mechanism as it slipped away from the kerb that she did not observe a man step out from the shadows and hail a taxi as it came crawling along to their rear.

"Do I understand, then, that your decision over the coffee

still stands, and you would not prefer anything stronger? I am a member of several clubs——”

“Don’t tell me about them,” she interrupted. “It would be too much like a busman’s holiday.” Then, seeing his puzzled expression, she laughed. “Of course, you wouldn’t know that one. It’s an old national joke.”

They crossed Shaftesbury Avenue, and he brought the car to a standstill outside the gaily lighted windows of the Café Noir. He said, with a slightly apologetic air, “They make excellent coffee here, and at this hour it is always quiet.”

And so it proved to be when he swung open the black-painted doors for her, and she entered, to find a solitary customer lounging in one corner, half asleep over an early morning newspaper, and a waiter, hollow-eyed and looking inexpressibly beyond all hope, leaning against the black counter, behind which sat a stout, untidy woman of middle age, talking to him in an undertone. They became silent as Christina and her escort selected a table, and presently the waiter came shuffling across to ask them, in a curious mixture of accents, what they would care to have. With complete indifference he took their order for coffee, and returned to his leaning position. The woman, meanwhile, had turned on the radio, a powerful set, and manipulated the knobs until she located dance-music. Evidently she was under the impression that business was looking up. Only then did she concentrate her attention upon the coffee question.

Christina, accepting a cigarette from the case that Vasquez offered, found herself regarding him curiously. He was an odd little man, rather pathetic really, and quite unlike the stories she had heard about him. But then hotels were always rife with fantastic tales regarding their visitors. And clubs seemed to be much about the same. She drew on her cigarette with particular enjoyment, noting with approval its unusual fragrance. The first cigarette after closing time was always a joy. Vasquez leaned forward across the table, one hand beating a nervous tattoo upon its black marble top. He eyed her steadily. He said, “That young man at Connolly’s, the dark one who passed us while we were talking. Who is he?”

“You mean Mr Fitzroberts?”

"That one, yes. He is your lover?" Then, observing her expression of polite astonishment, "Pardon me, I believe in England you call them boy friends?"

"In the part of England I come from," she said, "we never discuss these things with strangers."

"Then you would prefer not to tell me?"

"On the contrary. In order to avoid any misunderstanding I assure you that you're quite mistaken. There is nothing between Mr Fitzroberts and myself except a strong mutual dislike."

"That is not how it seemed to me. I thought he looked at me most unpleasantly, and as I was talking to you——"

"He has a naturally unpleasant outlook," she said, "particularly at two o'clock in the morning."

"I see. You may be right." He nodded his head several times, and appeared relieved. "Men are strange creatures, Miss Page."

"I'm finding that out gradually."

He lapsed into silence, while the waiter delivered the coffee, milk and cream, and a black bowl of multi-coloured sugar, and departed to slip once more into his trance-like state. The customer in the corner was beginning to nod and to make whistling noises through his teeth. Vasquez lowered his voice to a confidential murmur, unnecessary in view of the noise the radio was making. He said, "And how do you get on with the other people at Connolly's? Well, I hope?"

"Very well. Already they're like brothers and sisters to me. Why do you ask?"

But he ignored the question, countering it with another.

"So with the exception of the dark young man you are all united. Mr Connolly must be the ideal employer. Does no one ever talk of leaving?"

"They talk of very little else. Every other night they intend to walk out, particularly the chef, and Mr Siegman. He's the man who looks after the cloakroom. But somehow they never do. Hotels and clubs are like that. I once knew a waiter——"

He did not appear to be very interested in waiters, for he interrupted, "But you, at least, are quite content?"

"As content as I shall ever be in a job, I dare say."

"And you intend to stay there?"

"At the moment, yes."

"Forgive me for asking so personal a question, but do they pay you well?"

"Nobody pays well," she said. "They sometimes pay enough, but never well."

He sat back and regarded her for a while with a slightly baffled expression. He said then, "You are a very deceptive person, Miss Page. Entirely different from what one would expect."

"It's odd you should say that, because I was thinking the same thing about you."

"Why, what have you heard about me?"

"Nothing very much. But people talk, you know."

"Of course." He was silent for some time, sipping his coffee and smoking with quick, nervous movements, singularly ill at ease. He said suddenly, "Would you like to make some money?"

"That would depend," she said, "on what I should have to do for it."

"Miss Page, please do not think I am about to make what are, I believe, termed improper suggestions. If my interest in you were as simple as that I should not be sitting here talking. We Latins are often considered lazy, but, believe me, we do not waste our time. And then I already know several women, and in my present financial position I cannot afford any more. I am not, you understand, as wealthy as many people suppose."

She had finished her coffee, and was sitting, chin on hand, eyes somewhat heavy from want of sleep. She said, "I do try to understand people, Señor Vasquez. Partly because it's my job, and partly because they interest me. But I'm not feeling too bright just now, so if you could tell me exactly what you have in mind. . . ."

He might have been waiting for such a cue, for he pushed back his chair and rose quickly to his feet.

"You are tired, Miss Page. How thoughtless of me. If you are ready I will see you home now, and we will talk some other time."

He beckoned the waiter. For some reason, she thought, he had changed his mind. Now what had she said to make him do that? She could have sworn that he had started out with a definite plan, and out of sheer curiosity she would have liked to have known what it was. Curiosity, and something more, which she could not quite define. She was still pondering the question when they left the warmth of the café and sought sanctuary in his car from the chilling effect of the January wind outside. A taxi was parked in front of them, and as they moved away the driver started up his engine and followed at a comfortable distance. Christina said, coming out of her reverie, "My address is seven Harris Row. It's a turning off Gower Street."

"I know." Vasquez was staring straight in front of him and did not turn his head. "When I interest myself in anyone I find out quite a lot about them."

There was, in her present state of mind, no answer to that, so she closed her eyes, opening them now and then to glance drowsily out at sleeping London. They had rapidly left behind the nocturnal denizens of Soho, and entering the comparative quiet of Bedford Square there was no one she envied more than the oblivious occupants of the houses, as they flashed by. She had recently moved from the ladies' hostel, where she had lived for six months prior to her appointment at Connolly's, and had taken what was described in the advertisement as a self-contained flat. In point of fact it was one large, first-floor room, furnished with a divan bed and sundry oddments, a kitchenette, so small as to give a mouse an attack of claustrophobia, and in addition, the privilege of using a communal bathroom, when it was not in occupation by one or other of the fellow-residents. But the apartment was clean and reasonably comfortable, and a distinct improvement upon the hostel, where the proprietress had objected strongly to her newly acquired habit of arriving home between two and three in the morning.

She said, as the car swept round the corner of Harris Row and stopped outside No. 7, "Thank you very much, Señor. No doubt I shall be seeing you at the club one evening."

"No doubt whatever," he said, and came round to open the door for her. On the pavement she stood for a moment, hesitating, wondering vaguely whether there was not something further she should say. But he merely made her a formal bow, and with a shrug and a brief "good night" she turned and went quickly up the flight of stone steps.

And the man who had been watching them from the end of the Row, where it joined Gower Street, waited only for Vasquez to climb back into the car before he too went on his way.

CHAPTER VIII

BEING a man of some integrity, and considerably more honest than most, Frank Flash was prepared to admit that he was, in the vernacular, up a gum-tree. From a very real conviction that he was hot on the trail of something big his optimism had deteriorated to the realization that even after years of experience it was possible to make mistakes, and this appeared to be one of his.

To all outward appearances, the Art Treasures Emporium had settled down to a nice routine of legitimate business, with a new owner taking his percentage of the profits in place of the late Alfred Tilbury. Advertisements in the personal column of the *Morning Envoy* appeared as usual, but only those of the innocuous kind, urging the reader to seek the help and guidance of the Emporium, and nothing more. Olsen, who had paid several further visits, reported that Mr Budd was still dominating his particular section of the artistic world, and comfortably so. Regarding his new employer's lack of knowledge on the subject he had made sundry remarks of a derogatory nature, but no longer considered seeking fresh scope for his peculiar talents.

Flash had again interviewed Mrs Tilbury, who said that she was well satisfied to be rid of the Emporium and all its irritating associations and that she was making preparations for her departure to Canada. There was nothing much he

could do about that. As there was no direct evidence against her late husband she could hardly be accused of connivance with him. And the unusual recurrence of the advertisements could, with a little stretch of the imagination, be attributed to coincidence. Coincidence was a possibility that Flash loathed from the depths of his probing mind, but it had to be taken into consideration. To his further annoyance, Pete Jennings still lived in moderate splendour at Hammersmith, but whether the rise in his standard of living were due to dishonest sources remained to be proved.

Data regarding certain of the personnel and members of Connolly's Club was scarce, and not especially stimulating. There were Michael and his wife, on the rectitude of whom Flash was prepared to wager a year's pay; Cyril Siegman, who had been with them over four years, and owned a small house at Notting Hill and a wife in a sanatorium; young Fitzroberts, whose past history was somewhat obscure at present, but against whom there was nothing definite to go upon; Christina Page, a seemingly law-abiding, hard-working young woman; the Spanish boy, Ramon, whose parents ran a small café in Gray's Inn Road, and who were apparently determined that their son should start at the bottom and work his way up to the top in the world of catering; Mrs Summers, whose sole claim to distinction lay in the fact that she had presided over the ladies' toilet rooms of half the night clubs in London; the remainder of the staff and members, who ran very much according to type, with the exception, perhaps, of James Cunningham, who was of independent means and into whose antecedents Flash had already inquired and found nothing amiss, and Dominico Vasquez, hailing from Mexico, regarding whom Flash had cogitated until he was weary.

And then, one bright February morning, particularly bright as far as he was concerned, his weariness was dispelled by a fresh advertisement in the *Morning Envoy*: "A beautiful collection of ivories and jades. Do not fail to visit the Art Treasures Emporium, Fagin's Mews, Mayfair."

He read it through several times. In his eagerness, he almost read it upside down. Out came his theory again, the theory that he had nearly reached the point of shelving, and

he and Olsen went to work with the energy of four men, and inspired men at that. Whole new avenues of possibility were opened to them. Unless their surmise were completely incorrect, another robbery was in the process of organization, and this time they were one step ahead of their quarry, in that they were aware of it, and could make their plans accordingly. Furthermore, there seemed no doubt that the organizer, in this instance, was Vasquez, and that in turn brought forward a new probability regarding Tilbury's death, assuming it was not due to natural causes. What better motive for murder could anyone have than the desire to take over Tilbury's very remunerative business? Just how Vasquez could have brought about such an end was still a matter for conjecture, but it was an idea worthy of a little thought. And the fact that he was at Connolly's Club on the occasion of Tilbury's last visit lent weight to the suspicion.

The future movements of Señor Vasquez had now become a subject of intense interest to Flash, since the unknown 'A' to whom the advertisement was addressed must contact him somehow, either direct or through some channel as yet unestablished. Olsen was of the opinion that the Emporium itself was the most likely bet. Vasquez was in the habit of calling there twice a week, and the wording of the advertisement seemed very clearly to indicate an assignation on those hallowed premises. Flash, who did not share his certainty, nevertheless arranged for the Emporium to be under constant supervision, and also the Hotel Rouen, where Vasquez occupied an elaborate suite of rooms.

"And if we don't get them this time," he said to Olsen, "I can see myself looking for a new profession."

The latter grinned, more in sympathy than from any feeling of elation.

"Cheer up," he said, "your pals won't see you starve."

But when, the following morning, they ran through the information collected to date they had no special cause for celebration. Señor Vasquez had spent an apparently innocent day, having had no communication with the Emporium, either in person or by telephone. Indeed, he had not left his hotel before the evening, which he spent in the company of a

lady, with whom he had taken cocktails at a fashionable bar, dined at a no less fashionable restaurant, and subsequently had driven in his car to No. 15A Camborne Street, Mayfair, which was, presumably, the lady's apartment, since he had later emerged alone and returned immediately to his hotel. The name of the lady residing at that address was given as Mrs Magda Schutte, and upon digesting a detailed description of Señor Vasquez's late companion, Flash looked more than usually thoughtful.

The Art Treasures Emporium, which was not more than fifteen minutes' walk from Camborne Street, had shown little sign of activity on the previous day. It had been visited by a number of customers of the usual type, but nobody upon whom suspicion might reasonably fall.

"Give them time," Olsen said. "If they're in no hurry, neither, for that matter, are we." He was sitting in Flash's office, and had been idly running through a collection of the Emporium's past advertisements. He said suddenly, "It would be sheer hell if we were barking up the wrong tree, Frank. Suppose Vasquez never contacts his man, but leaves it for some one else to do? This lady friend, for instance?"

"I was about to start working on that," Flash said. "I've an idea . . ."

The telephone rang, and he lifted the receiver with more than usual willingness. He was informed that a lady wished to speak to him, a Miss Montague.

"Put her on," he said, and aside to Olsen, with one hand over the mouthpiece, "If this is what I think it is, we'll be wearing each other's hats in no time."

A woman's voice, warmed with a touch of excitement, came precisely over the wire. She said, "Is that Mr Flash? Oh, this is Miss Montague, of the Art Treasures Emporium. How are you? Do you remember me?"

"Very well to both questions," Flash said. "What can I do for you?"

"Oh, nothing. I've just got some news which I believe is rather important, so I thought I'd get on to you at once. Is it all right to talk over the telephone?"

"Perfectly. Go right ahead, Miss Montague. I'm listening."

"You remember the . . . er—lady we discussed last time we met? Well, I've seen her again."

"You have? When was this?"

"Last night. At about ten o'clock, or just a little after. I spent the evening with a friend, and we were passing Gregori's restaurant, you know, that big place off Piccadilly Circus, and she was coming out."

"Alone?" Flash asked quickly, although he guessed the answer.

"No, that's the important point. She was with a man. I know there's nothing extraordinary in that, especially with a woman of her type, if you see what I mean, and I probably shouldn't have recognized him, because we were on the opposite side of the road, my friend and I, and it was fairly dark, but they stood there talking for a while, and naturally remembering what you said, I stopped too, and then I saw him quite clearly, and really, I can hardly believe it even now, but it was the man who bought the Emporium from Mrs Tilbury. His name is Vasquez. . . ."

"Never mind his name," Flash said. "What happened then?"

"Well, nothing, to tell you the truth." She was obviously disappointed in her own efforts as a sleuth, because she rushed on to defend herself. "You see, I was with a friend, and there wasn't much I could do. I could hardly get a taxi and start chasing people all over London without him wondering what it was all about. And I couldn't tell him, because I thought in the first place you wouldn't want me to, and in any case, he'd hate me to be mixed up in anything—well, you know, anything that might get into the papers. As it was, he didn't like me standing there, so I had to say I thought I'd recognized some friends. So he said why didn't I go over and speak to them, but of course I didn't want them to see me. Anyway, they walked off just then, in the direction of the Circus, so I left them to get on with it. But I wish now I'd followed them at all costs. What I mean is——"

"That's quite all right, Miss Montague," Flash cut in. "You did very well, and I'm grateful. If ever you want a testimonial, just call on me."

"Oh, I'm only too glad to help." She sounded considerably mollified. "It was a bit of a shock at first, seeing her with him, I mean, but on thinking it over I'm not really surprised. With women like that it's first one man and then another. Still, you'd have thought she would have waited, just for decency's sake. Anyway, Mr Flash, it's all quite clear now, isn't it?"

"Clear as a swamp," Flash said cheerfully. "I really am much obliged to you, Miss Montague. And if you see or hear anything else, let me know."

"I will, definitely. I only hope you're in time. I don't like him very much, but he's not really a bad sort of man."

She rang off at last, and Flash rose, stretching himself with satisfaction.

"That," he said, "was Miss Montague, of the Art Treasures Emporium. She just confirmed a suspicion I already had in mind, that this Mrs Schutte who dined with Vasquez last night is the same lady who was running round with Tilbury. Miss Montague is under the impression that she's Public Enemy number one, and though I think that's a bit of an exaggeration, she certainly may be our missing link."

"Maybe it's not such an exaggeration," Olsen suggested. "Miss Montague has given me some pretty arctic looks on occasion, but I'm not going to let that prejudice me against her judgment. Isn't it just possible that the mysterious Mrs Schutte is the brains behind this business, and having got Tilbury out of the way for one reason or another, she is now using Vasquez as a substitute?"

Flash sighed. He said, "It's possible. I'm prepared to believe that anything's possible in this case. All the same, I don't much like the sound of Vasquez as the innocent country boy. Oh, hell, I wish it were as clear as Miss Montague thinks."

"Let's take a look at 15A Camborne Street," Olsen said. "I like the sound of that as a clearing depot."

"I'm with you there. We'll not only put an eye on it, we'll keep it there, and if so much as a beetle gets in or out without my knowledge I'll give it a medal. Whoever has been responsible for my sleepless nights, we've got them now.'s

CHAPTER IX

BUT he was wrong. Within twenty-four hours they were confronted with blazoned Press headlines that brought a scowl to Flash's usually impassive face:

ANOTHER WEST END ROBBERY—£5000 HAUL

ART THIEVES' PARK LANE COUP

FAMOUS COLLECTOR VICTIM OF NEW ART THEFT

Beneath these announcements, in varying degrees of urgency according to the newspaper concerned, it was stated that on the afternoon of the previous day thieves had got away with two small pictures, to the approximate value of five thousand pounds, from the private collection of Sir Meredith Jordan-Combe, at his house in Crichton Street, Mayfair, W.1. At the present time the house was inhabited solely by the caretaker, and in the absence of the owner was in the process of redecoration. On the afternoon in question there were five men at work, two on the exterior and three on the interior of the building, and the caretaker had therefore no reason for suspicion when a plumber arrived, ostensibly from a reputable firm, to overhaul the hot-water system. She had duly shown him over those parts of the house affected, and since everything of value was safely locked away, troubled no more about him, until nearly three-quarters of an hour later, when she was startled by the sound of rushing water. Making her way to the upstairs premises, she discovered the plumber in one of the bathrooms, inches deep in water, which had already overflowed into the corridor. He explained that there was some technical fault in the central-heating system, and that it would be necessary for him to inspect the pipes and radiators all over the house. This she allowed him to do, after he had turned off the water at the main, and while she was getting the decorators to assist her in stemming the flow of water before it had time to reach the staircase. In the midst of all

this confusion he came up from the ground floor to announce that he would have to return to headquarters for further tools and an assistant, as it was going to be a difficult job. Without waiting for her reply, he went off, bag in hand, and annoyed at the casualness of his attitude to the catastrophe, she had gone straight to the telephone to make a complaint to his employers. It was only then that she discovered he was in no way connected with the firm in question, neither had they been instructed to send anyone to the house on that day.

Thoroughly alarmed by this information, she had made a careful check and found that the door of the picture gallery on the ground floor had been forced, obviously by the hands of an expert, and that two pictures, *Cattle by Moonlight* and *Cattle at Daybreak*, the work of a famous seventeenth-century painter, had disappeared. They were small oil-paintings in narrow gilt frames, and could easily have been concealed in a bag the size of the one the spurious plumber was carrying. She then telephoned to the police, and Scotland Yard men were soon upon the scene. Sir Meredith Jordan-Combe, who was at present on the Riviera, had been notified, and was returning to London forthwith. Meanwhile the police had the matter well in hand, and were anxious to interview anyone who had seen a man answering to the description of the 'plumber' in the vicinity of Park Lane between the hours of three and four on the day of the theft. It was believed that the man might have had an accomplice waiting with an automobile.

"Or an aeroplane," Flash said. "Where does the Press get these fancy ideas? As if a man dressed as a plumber is going to leap into a limousine and shout, 'Home, James!' Why shouldn't he take a bus like a law-abiding citizen?"

Olsen laughed, although he was not feeling very amused. He said, "The way they go on you'd think that these crime kings were carrying the stuff around in sacks marked 'swag,' and all we'd got to do was to collar them."

Not that they were so very much bothered about what the Press did or did not say. The thing that really intrigued them was how this enterprising burglar had come by his extensive information regarding the scene of plunder, and how, if at all, he had contacted the one who had put him up to it. To

their knowledge, he had not been in communication with Vasquez, the Art Treasures Emporium, or their latest suspect, Mrs Magda Schutte. Neither, on this occasion, could the culprit have been Pete Jennings, since they knew for a fact that the latter had spent that afternoon visiting his mother, who was seriously ill in the prison hospital. In any case, this job had all the ear-marks of an old hand, a man experienced in the art of pulling the wool over unwary eyes and getting away with it. In that connexion, they had already interviewed several likely persons without tangible result.

It was Olsen who thought of Bluff Bailey. Bluff was a known character, a man between thirty and forty who had made for himself a not uneventful career in the world of crime. He had been in the hands of the police on two occasions, and his methods were notorious. Scorning the natural cover afforded by night, he preferred the frequently more successful coup of walking in under the very noses of those he intended to rob, helping himself with generosity, and walking out again. Though they had his finger-prints, photographs, and a comprehensive description of him, he was not an easy man to nail down. Of medium height, he had the knack of making himself look taller or shorter at will, and an india-rubber kind of face, the features of which could be twisted about to form a far more effective disguise than any false beard, wig, or other camouflage. He could speak three languages and a dozen or more dialects, and his histrionic powers were quite extraordinary. Recently he had been lying low and giving no trouble, and rumour had it that he was no longer in London.

"Rumour be damned!" Olsen said. "It's just his job. He's got a pretty sense of humour, and it would appeal to him to get them all mixed up in a young flood, probably helping them to wipe off all the finger-prints before going below to pull off his little plan. Once down there and without supervision he could go to work with gloves on. Now I wonder where we can get our hands on him?"

They had not long to wonder. It transpired, from a report received from one of the plain-clothes men whom Flash had installed on the first floor of an empty building opposite the Carnival Club, that Bluff Bailey had called there at approxi-

mately 10.30 two nights previously, in company with André Caryl, a young man who had also crossed swords with the law on several occasions. The former had left alone after about three-quarters of an hour, and Caryl had remained until closing time. Here was something very definite to go upon. Bluff was in London, and the odds were that he would not be very difficult to find.

Sir Meredith's caretaker, called upon to identify photographs of the suspected man, was not so definite. She stated that it might be the same man, but she could not be sure. The plumber who had wrought so much havoc she described as a short man who walked with a limp, who was neither fair nor dark, and who had a mouth that went up one side and was inclined to twitch. Flash said privately, "Bluff would grow a tail and walk on his hands if he thought it would do him any good," but it was no use telling the caretaker that. For the moment they had to be content with surmise. Meanwhile it had occurred to him that coincidence was again putting in an appearance. Bluff Bailey had called at the Carnival Club the night prior to the robbery, and it was on the same day that they had been so elated to discover the Emporium advertisement in the *Morning Envoy*. Thus his movements had repeated exactly those of Pete Jennings on a previous and similar occasion.

"We'll pull him in just as soon as we can," Flash said. "Caryl, too. You never can tell what that boy may have been up to. And to help us along we'll go and have a little chat with Josh Ellis. It'll be interesting to see just how quickly he says no to everything we ask him."

En route they made a detour via Camborne Street. The apartment of Mrs Magda Schutte was the centre of much speculation on the part of Flash just then, although so far he had not seen fit to make any move in that direction. The street was not of the most pretentious kind, and the flat, the front door of which was situated alongside a small shop bearing the sign 'Washwhite Laundry,' had a somewhat dilapidated air about it. Indeed, it seemed to Flash that if Mrs Schutte had really been on intimate terms with the late Alfred Tilbury he must have been quite as mean as his wife asserted to have housed the lady in so unattractive a dwelling.

Peering from the taxi window as they approached on the opposite side of the road, he was in time to see the diminutive figure of a woman emerge from the building and walk in their direction. As she passed them he recognized her, and turned quickly to Olsen.

"Did you see where that young lady came from? The laundry or the flat?"

"The laundry," Olsen said. "Why? Do you know her?"

"Miss Page. She works at Connolly's. For the moment I thought. . . . But if she came out of the laundry it's not important."

And he lapsed into silence.

CHAPTER X

LATE that evening Christina Page was sitting in her office when Sling came in. She had gone there more in search of refuge than from any belief in her own ability to concentrate amid the confusion of the club that night. It was Mrs Connolly's birthday, and she had invited so many people to celebrate it with her that the premises were positively alive with them. For an hour or more friends had drifted to and fro, greeting her, and each other, and any odd acquaintances whom they happened to recognize among the general throng. Primed with his favourite brandy, Michael charged about in their midst, the apotheosis of good-fellowship under the benign smile of his beloved spouse. The drink flowed alongside the laughter and light-hearted chatter, while the party gradually moved itself from the cocktail bar and lounges to the dining-room and dance-floor.

Christina, who had done her best to cope with the initial stages, was only too glad to withdraw, secretly envying the absent Siegman, who, despite constant deploring of his own bad luck, was sufficiently fortunate to have the evening off duty. When Sling entered she glanced up and away again, for she had no desire to talk to anyone just then, him least of all.

But he had other ideas. He said, "Hallo, sweetness," and came across to flop down in the chair on the other side of her desk. He lighted a cigarette and met her inquiring gaze, and she was annoyed to find herself thinking how different he looked when he smiled. He went on, "I overheard Mrs C. saying that you were sweetness itself, and the name fits."

"Is that how you spend your spare time, listening to conversations not meant for you?"

"Why not? They're so much more interesting than those that are."

"Well, you may be the only person here with nothing better to do, but I'd be glad if you'd do it somewhere else."

"I'm in hiding," he said, settling himself more comfortably. "I've just been talking to an old harridan who looks as if she'd climbed out of her coffin to have one more fling on earth. Where Mrs C. finds them I can't think. Thank God she has a birthday only once a year. By the way, I saw your friend Vasquez hovering around. Don't you want to see him?"

"What makes you think he's a particular friend of mine?"

"Well, isn't he? I seem to remember he was clinging very affectionately to your arm one evening. What did he have to say?"

She leaned her elbows on the desk and surveyed him calmly. She said, "You have some delightful characteristics. If you can't overhear what people are saying you never hesitate to ask."

"You're evading the question, but it doesn't matter. I'll find out sooner or later, if I think it worth while. And you'll find out a thing or two yourself if you have much to do with friend Vasquez. He's peas in the pot."

"If you'd talk English I might be able to follow you."

"He's hot. He's swift. He'd take ten quids' worth of change for five and then swear he was five light. I can't think what you see in him."

"Do I *have* to see anything in him in order to be polite? As he is a member of this club, I can hardly refuse to answer if he wishes to speak to me. And I've never found him anything but charming and courteous."

"Really? To me he looks like a rat with a hat on. What is it about him that charms you especially—his money?"

She said very quietly, "You have some funny ideas, haven't you?"

"Very funny. I often sit up all night laughing. Have you seen the scintillating Mrs Schutte lately?"

She was silent, ostentatiously bending over the books and papers spread out around her, and he yawned and rose, pushing the chair back into position.

"Oh, well, if you're not in the mood to talk I think I'll go and give Michael a hand with the wolves. He must have had enough by now."

He turned away, and she did not look up until she knew he had gone. Then she got quickly to her feet, lit an unaccustomed cigarette, and began to pace about the room. For some reason she felt nervy and irritable to-night. She supposed it must be the result of late hours. She had never felt like this before, had been congratulating herself on having adjusted her habits so easily. But of course it was only a temporary reaction. She went back to her desk at length and turned her attention to Mrs Connolly's correspondence, which was not inconsiderable and formed the bulk of her secretarial work. Michael never seemed to receive anything much except bills.

Immersed in thought, she was quite unaware of how long she had been sitting there before the room was plunged into complete darkness. Taken by surprise, she continued to sit there for a few minutes, staring into the blackness, then, hearing a confused medley of sounds outside, she rose quickly and fumbled her way to the door. On the other side she paused. There was not a single light burning anywhere, but Ramon, who had just admitted two visitors, was trying valiantly, and without much success, to illuminate their way by a series of hastily lit matches. She said, coming to his assistance, "Good evening. I'm so sorry this has happened. But it's just a simple fuse, I believe, and can be fixed in a few minutes. If you'll wait here . . . Ramon, haven't you some kind of a torch handy?"

"No, Miss Page. No torch," he repudiated, and continued to wave lighted matches in the air with all the pleasure of a child on Guy Fawkes Day. The man and woman in evening dress stood helplessly peering about them, undecided whether to go or to stay.

"Excuse me," Chris said, "I'll see what I can do," and made her way rapidly down the corridor. As she neared the end dim lights began to spring up in the cocktail bar and dining-room, the light of candles hastily procured from the emergency supply. Every one seemed to be talking at once, and as she was about to step into the dining-room she was confronted by Michael, a lighted candle held in front of his face like the torch of freedom, his hair on end, his eyes wild. He said, "Where's Harry? Tell him to get busy, pronto. It must be a general fuse."

"He's not here to-night, Mr Connolly. He's home with neuralgia."

"With who? Oh, never mind. Sling, then. Where's he?"

"I don't know. I thought he was with you."

"He came in and went out again. In the name of the Holy Mother, that boy does pick hellish times to disappear. Is Siegman here? He'll do at a pinch."

"He's off duty, too, I'm afraid. Legitimately."

"Glory be to God and all His holy angels! Can't I rely on *anyone*? When there's nothing doing they're all over the place, and when a thing like this happens . . . Why did it have to happen to-night, of all nights? Get me a ginger beer, there's a good girl, and tell him to move fast. It's probably a company's fuse, anyway. Must get back to Lilian."

He thrust the candle into her hands and made an elephantine progress back to his table, where his wife sat amid her friends, gamely laughing and chatting, only the hard brilliance of her eyes betraying her inner condemnation of the circumstances. Chris stood for a moment staring dazedly after him, wondering whether it was he or she who had gone crazy. What on earth, she thought, did he want with ginger beer, he who never touched anything weaker than brandy in an emergency? Then with a shrug she retreated into the cocktail lounge and said to the barman, "One ginger beer for Mr Connolly," carefully avoiding his incredulous stare. By the light of two candles propped up on the bar he poured out the beverage and handed it to her in silence.

Candle in one hand and glass in the other, she emerged into the corridor and stumbled headlong into Sling, who was

passing at a run. He swore softly and stepped back a pace, flicking from his coat the fizzy liquid that had spilt all over him. He said, "What in hell is that?" and waved a lighted torch in the direction of the almost empty glass.

"Ginger beer," she said. "Mr Connolly asked me to get it."

"Good God!" He let out a staccato laugh. "You'll be the end of me. What he wants is an engineer. For the lights. He ought to know better than to talk slang to young ladies. Don't bother, though. Tell him I'll fix it myself. And next time you feel like throwing a drink over me, make it a straight whisky."

He went off in the direction of the cellars, and she returned to the cocktail bar, banged down the glass upon the counter, and, remembering her waiting guests, controlled her frayed temper sufficiently to go in search of them. But Michael, urged by his wife to do something, came bounding after her, and caught her by the elbow.

"Miss Page! Did you get that ginger beer?"

"No!" She almost shouted the word, but Michael was sweating, and she felt suddenly sorry for him. "I mean, I did try, but Mr Fitzroberts bumped into me and . . . oh, I don't know *what* I mean, but at any rate, he's gone to fix the fuse himself."

"Has he, bejabbers? It's like his nerve to turn up at the last minute as if nothing had happened. It's the company's fuse, I'm thinking, but that won't worry him. I'd better see what he's up to." He looked at her in sudden concern, observing for the first time her unusually ruffled appearance. "But don't upset yourself, my dear. Go into the office and have a nip of brandy, and pour one for me. Be back in a minute."

He was off again, leaving her to wonder whether he really meant brandy this time, or if it were just another pseudonym. She decided to leave the matter in abeyance for the moment. Her waiting guests were more important.

Michael meanwhile blundered his way through the darkness of the corridor and, peeping into the dining-room, observed with satisfaction that many of the occupants had decided to make the best of a bad job and were dancing in the long-

shadowed candlelight to the band's irrepressible music. The latter, to its credit, had scarcely ceased playing since the first few moments of the catastrophe. And some of the dancers, the younger ones particularly, seemed to be enjoying the bizarre touch inadvertently introduced into their usually conventional surroundings. The waiters, grave-faced and priest-like from long years of habit, behaved as if nothing out of the way had occurred.

Mrs Connolly, determinedly holding her party together, was wandering round the floor in the staid arms of an elderly peer, who looked intoxicated but happy. Then in a flash of panic Michael remembered the kitchen. He must go round there in a minute and find out how things were. The chef might be taking grave exception to working in medieval lighting. With a fresh spurt of energy he rushed off to the cellars, and was cautiously feeling for the top stair when the lights came on again in full force. He stood there for a moment, blinking at the abrupt transition from darkness, then with a deep sigh of relief he charged down the winding stairs that led to the club's very extensive underground premises.

"Good work, Sling!" he called. "Knew you'd be able to fix it, boy."

Arrived below, he ran a hand over his damp forehead and looked round for the subject of his congratulations. But the smile that had automatically spread over his face froze into a look of stupefaction. Sling was standing over by the wall where were situated the fuse-boxes, one hand upon the mains switch, the other hanging limply at his side. And at his feet, face downward, lay the body of a man.

CHAPTER XI

As Michael approached Sling slowly raised his head like a man coming out of a nightmare. He said, "You're just in time, Mike. Look at the pretty find I've made."

"In the name of all saints!" Cautiously Michael came a

step nearer, peered at the recumbent figure, and leapt back as though fearing contagion from a plague. "Who is he? And what's he doing in my cellar?"

Sling brought out his case mechanically, lighted a cigarette, and flicked the smoking match so that it flew in an arc over his shoulder. He said, "It's our old friend Vasquez. And he's not doing anything because he's dead. If you come this side you'll see what I mean."

His one eye dilated in sheer incredulity, Michael walked slowly round and stood staring at the wound that had been inflicted at the side and a little to the back of the dead man's head. A thin stream of blood had trickled on to the stone flooring. In a dull kind of way he noticed that Vasquez was wearing a coat over his evening dress. There was silence for several seconds. Michael said at last, in a voice from which all animation had gone, "What happened?"

"How do I know? After I left you the last time I went out for a breath of air and a change of alcohol, and when I came back the place was in darkness. I thought it must be a fuse and came straight along here, having been nearly mown down by little Miss Page. And the next thing I knew I was tripping over something. He's not a happy sight now, is he? But he looked even worse by torchlight. Naturally I made straight for the lights and found it wasn't a fuse at all. Some one had simply switched them off at the mains."

"You mean Vasquez?"

"Well, if you're prepared to believe he switched off the lights and then hit himself on the head I'm not going to argue with you."

"No—I see what you mean. It must have been some one else." Michael took in a long gasp of air and shot a quick glance over their immediate surroundings. "You're sure that's all?"

"Certainly I'm sure. Or do you imagine I did it myself and forgot to mention it?"

"Don't be a fool, boy." The first shock over, Michael's temper was beginning to reassert itself. The idea of anyone daring to commit murder on his premises was too much. "What I mean is that whoever did it can't have got far and is

probably hiding somewhere here, if no one passed you on your way down. I'm going to take a look round."

Sling shrugged.

"Just as you like. But if anyone's so damn' silly as to knock Vasquez out and then climb into an empty beer barrel they deserve all they get out of it."

The cellar wandered a long way underground, the first part being lined on either side with barrels and kegs of all sizes and having walls of whitewashed brick and a stone floor. It did not take them long to make their inspection of this and the three similar sections leading one from the other, which had been given over to the storage of wines and spirits. Everything was in perfect order, with no sign of anything to arouse curiosity. Michael, who was breathing hard and sweating profusely, paused beside a case of his own favourite brandy, lovingly selected a bottle, and brought out the corkscrew that was a special and much-used adjunct to his penknife.

"If ever I needed a drink, I need one now," he said, and withdrawing the cork, put the bottle to his lips. When satisfying an urgent necessity he was not fussy over small details. He swallowed a more than adequate dose, sighed, and waved the bottle in the approximate direction where Vasquez lay. He asked, "What are we going to do about *that*?"

Sling shrugged again.

"As it's my first body, I'm not very well up in the routine. But I imagine the police have something to do with it."

"Never!" Michael took another long pull at the bottle and glared round as if still half expecting to see the head of a killer appear from somewhere. "I'll not have them tramping all over my club, upsetting every one. How would it look, a man found dead in my cellar, and one of the members too? God knows what people would say. No, we'll have to do better than that."

Sling, leaning against the wall, arms folded, regarded him sceptically. He said, "What then? We can hardly shovel him into an ambulance and send him off to hospital like we did with Tilbury. Doesn't it strike you as odd, by the way, that this is the second member to get his head bashed in? I know Tilbury's wasn't so bad, but it was a bash, nevertheless."

"Have a drink," Michael said, offering him the bottle, and Sling immediately became on guard. He knew only too well that Michael seldom handed out his brandy by the bottle without an ulterior motive. He said:

"Thanks. But if it's all the same to you I'll have a drop of wárm and frisky."

Whereupon he found himself a bottle of Scotch, produced a corkscrew of his own, and emulated Michael's example. Michael said, without looking at him, "There're no two ways about it, Sling, my boy. You'll have to get rid of it."

The latter, in the tricky process of refreshment, choked, recovered, and slowly set the bottle down upon the ground. He said decisively, "Not this time, Mike. Not me. I don't mind what I do in the ordinary way of business. I made that clear right from the start. But you never said anything about getting rid of bodies."

"How was I to know they'd start dying off like the plague? Do you suppose it ever happened before? Not in the whole history of Connolly's has there been such a run of bad luck as we've had lately. But it'll not happen again, not if I have to guard the doors myself. And I'll be making it up to you, Sling boy, sure I will, if you'll do it just this once. You wouldn't let me down—now, would you?"

"I'm resigning," Sling said. "It's a pity, because I like this job, but there are limits to what I'll stand."

He turned away and drank again.

"To think it's come to this," Michael said, and sank down upon an empty crate, his head buried in his hands, his brandy neglected on the floor beside him. The whole of his massive body seemed shaken from sheer emotion. Sling stood and watched him for a while. He said at last, "All right, all right. If you're going to throw a fit. . . . But remember, it's the last time. I'm not turning professional undertaker for anyone."

Michael sprang to his feet again and clapped the younger man on the shoulder, with an enthusiasm that nearly caused him to lose balance.

"I knew it, boy. I knew you'd not rat on me. I'll be getting back to the folks, then, and telling them everything's in order."

"Hey—just a minute," Sling restrained him. "For Pete's sake be careful what you say. Just tell them it was a fuse, and I've fixed it. And get rid of them as soon as you can, because I can't do a thing till the place is clear."

"I'll not breathe a word out of place, depend upon it. And you'd best come up too, and we'll lock the cellar. We don't want anyone nosing about down here."

"No, better leave it open and I'll come up and mount guard from above. It might look suspicious if anyone tried to get in and found it locked."

"You're right. You're absolutely right. We'll come straight down here after closing time. Better leave the spirits, boy. We'll need 'em. I'll think of something to tell Lilian. She mustn't know anything about this. She'd never forgive me for letting a member get murdered on her birthday. And she'll be sending out a search-party if I don't get back now."

With the guilty air of a conspirator he started back the way they had come, with Sling following. They cast a brief, interrogating glance in the direction of the body, where it sprawled at the far end, very still and rather pathetic. Sling said, "We'll have to go into this presently, when we've time. I don't like the way things are shaping."

Michael did not answer. He was already half-way up the stairs and moving fast. At the top he turned and waited.

"Leave the light on," he said. "It looks better. I'll just cut back to the dining-room, if you don't mind sticking around here for a bit."

"Don't worry about me. I'm loving every minute of it. Why do I bother to read the Sunday newspapers?"

"You're after being cynical again," Michael admonished and went quickly to join his wife, who, radiant with good spirits, was regaling her select company with some anecdote of a mildly amusing nature. She looked up as he approached and greeted him with her most charming smile.

"There you are, darling. I was beginning to wonder what had happened to you. Is everything all right now?"

"Couldn't be better, dear. It was just a fuse. Sling fixed it."

"Such a versatile young man. I don't know *what* we should do without him. Where is he now?"

"Oh, roaming around, dear. You know the way he does."

He sat down and attempted to slip back into his earlier exuberant enjoyment of the party. But hilarity was gone, and in its place the memory of blood upon a stone floor. He poured himself a stiff brandy and drank it at a gulp. The lady at his side, a widow with a great deal of money, a charming smile, and a weakness for ancient liquor, said, with some concern, "You're looking pale, Michael. Do you feel all right?"

"Never felt better in my life," he said, and poured another drink for himself and one for her, and lapsed back into silence, staring gloomily ahead. He was roused again presently by his wife's voice saying, "Where is Sling, dear? He's such a strange young man, to wander away from a party like that. I thought he'd be dancing this evening."

"He can't," Michael said, rushing into the first explanation that presented itself. "He's hurt his foot."

"Has he really? Is it very bad, and how did he come to do such a thing?"

"He stumbled over something. In the dark. When the lights were off. It's nothing much, he'll soon get over it."

"Well, if you say it's all right."

Her look was bright and inquiring. Clearly she did not believe a word of it. She was suspicious of something and was drawing her own conclusions. But he felt too weary to care. Just let him get over the rest of the evening, and, please heaven, they'd be out of the wood yet. He wondered what Sling was doing. He was a good boy. He'd see that everything went off all right. But how to get rid of all this crowd? Surreptitiously he looked at his watch. Barely one o'clock. Even after the bulk of them had gone there would still be a few stragglers hanging around. He would never be able to last it out. The anxiety was killing him. Even the brandy was failing in its usual effect. Full of enthusiasm, young people were still dancing. The rumba band had taken over, and were really putting their backs into it. Did they have to make so much noise? To-morrow he must tell them to play a little softer. It sounded terrible. Didn't young people ever go to bed nowadays? It was good for business, of course, but

to-night their keen adherence to the creed that you can enjoy yourself only after midnight was driving him crazy. Lilian was not being very helpful, either. She seemed determined to keep every one hanging about until the very last minute. Usually she was inclined the other way. Was she doing it just to annoy him?

When he could stand it no longer he rose. He had lost all count of time. He only knew that he had to go along and see what was going on outside. In answer to his wife's inquiry, he said, "I've just remembered, dear. Miss Page wants to see me about something. Urgent."

He turned and almost ran from the room, and at the door encountered Sling, who eyed him sourly.

"I was just coming to see where you were. I can't play this waiting game much longer."

"I'm coming now, boy. Couldn't get away before."

But Mrs Connolly had sighted them, and came quickly across the room. She said, flashing Sling a smile, "My dear, I'm so sorry to hear about your poor foot. Is it any better?"

His narrowed eyes looked from her to Michael and back again. He said, "Not much. Which is a pity, because I feel like using it."

"Dancing, you mean? Of course, such a shame. And on my birthday, too. But things *do* go wrong at such times. I was quite put out about the lights. But now everything's wonderful, except your poor foot. Won't you come and have a last-minute drink with us?"

"It's very kind of you, Mrs Connolly, but I'm just finishing off a job in the cellar. I only fixed the lights temporarily. They might go again at any minute."

"Oh, that would be too awful. Well, hurry back."

She drifted over to her table, and Sling clutched Michael's arm.

"How much longer is this going on?"

"Only a few minutes," Michael pleaded. "Just hang on a while, Sling boy, and everything will be fine, you'll see. Has anyone tried to go down there?"

"Not so far."

They were pacing slowly towards the cellar, and were just in time to see Miss Page appearing at the top of the stairs.

Their joint exclamation caused her to stop abruptly, nearly dropping the bottle she carried in one hand. Michael said, "Miss Page! What the devil have you been doing down there?"

"I beg your pardon?" Startled, she stared from one to the other.

"The cellar!" Michael could hardly control his excitement, but made an effort under the influence of Sling's warning frown. "What have you been doing in the cellar?"

"I only went down to fetch a bottle of brandy. I just remembered you wanted some, and there was none in your office, so I thought I'd better get a fresh bottle. Why? Is anything wrong?"

"Apparently," Sling said, "you're not a young lady to faint at the sight of blood."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," she began, but with one accord they suddenly pushed past her and went down the stairs two at a time. She followed slowly. Below, Sling was pacing about the cellar like a man distracted, and Michael was saying, "A very nice job, my boy. How did you do it?"

Of the body that had recently lain both in the corner and on their consciences there was no sign. Sling came to an abrupt halt and stared at Michael with brooding eyes. He said, "I didn't do it. The last time I saw him he was lying there, in that corner, and I haven't been down since. Now where in hell . . ." He came across and gripped the girl by the arm. "Miss Page, *what happened to that body?*"

Angrily she wrenched herself free. She said, "I'll be glad if you'll keep your pugilistic tactics for the race-course, or wherever you're accustomed to use them. Mr Connolly, what is going on here to-night? First the lights go out and every one is rushing about as if they've gone mad. And then you accuse me . . . well, frankly I don't know what I'm being accused of, but whatever it is, I don't like it."

Michael, one hand clutched to his head, was staring about him as if surrounded by unseen enemies. He said, "You tell her, Sling. It's gone far and away beyond me."

"I'm trying to, but she won't listen. Now, look, Miss Page. You remember when the lights went out and you cannoned

into me in the corridor? Well, I came straight down here, just as I said I would, and in that corner, by the fuse-boxes, I found Vasquez lying. And he was the dearest thing I've ever seen in this club, which is saying a lot. Mike came down, and we had a little say-and-say, and then we went upstairs again. Neither of us has been down here since, but you have. So I'm asking you, what happened to that body?"

She was looking at him with an expression between fear and horror. She had cast one glance in the direction he had indicated, and had not looked again. She said slowly, "I don't believe it. Señor Vasquez was upstairs not very long ago. You told me so yourself."

"And so he was. I saw him. He was wandering vaguely in all directions at once. Then he disappeared, and I didn't see him again until I found him down here. Now even if we accept that brandy story, Miss Page, you're not going to tell us that when you came down just now you saw nothing? Because I for one am not going to believe it."

"I don't care what you believe. Mr Connolly, I know I shouldn't say this, and if you think me impertinent I'm perfectly willing to resign. But frankly, I think that you and Mr Fitzroberts have been drinking."

"My God!" Sling, who had lighted a cigarette, brought his teeth savagely through the end of it. "Wouldn't anyone take to drink if they found a body? But have it your own way. We imagined the whole thing. And that blood-stain is where the cat committed suicide."

He seized her by the hand and almost dragged her across to the late scene of crime, where he pointed a triumphant finger to the blood, now almost dry, that disfigured the floor. She stood there, silently looking down, not attempting to withdraw her hand from his grip upon it. Michael, moving to join them, said wearily, "It's the truth he's telling you, Miss Page. Vasquez was there, and he was dead, if I never move from this spot. But where he is now. . . ." He raised his eyes heavenwards.

"If he's dead," she said, her voice quietly insistent, "I assure you I had nothing to do with it. I didn't know him very well, but I had no reason to dislike him. But you"—

she turned upon Sling, snatching her hand from his—"you never lost an opportunity of talking against him. You do it with every one, or quite a lot of people. But you particularly had it in for Señor Vasquez. You were positively fanatical about him. You say you found him dead. How do we know you didn't kill him yourself?"

He regarded her for a moment, head to one side, as if she were some rare freak of humanity. He said, appealing to Michael, "What can you do with a woman like that? It's hysteria of the nervous system, if not downright chicanery."

Michael said, somewhat irritably, "Oh, leave her alone, Sling, for the love of heaven. As though she had anything to do with it. I'm sorry, Miss Page. We wouldn't have told you, only you happened along at the wrong time. Anyway, what are we arguing about? He's gone, hasn't he? That's the main thing. As long as there aren't any bodies cluttering up my cellar, I'm not going to lose any sleep. Now you run along, Miss Page, and forget all about it. If you see my wife tell her I'll be up presently. And in the name of all the angels, don't breathe a word of this. I'd never hear the last of it. I'm just going to take a look round."

She stood there undecidedly.

"But Mr Connolly, shouldn't we get on to the police? After all, you can't very well——"

"Police be damned," he said. "There's no body, is there? If we reported that we'd found one and lost it they'd think we were crazy, or drunk, like you did. No, better let it rest, Miss Page. No point in raising the dust and letting it lie again. Everything'll be quite all right by the morning, you'll see."

"Very well, if that's how you feel about it, you can rely upon me. Good night, Mr Connolly."

And carefully ignoring Sling, she made a dignified departure, the brandy bottle still clutched in one hand.

"Of all the jumped-up, wool-headed, obstinate little——" Sling was beginning, but Michael cut in.

"Turn it in, boy. Miss Page is all right. I can't think why you two don't get on together. You don't really believe she had anything to do with this?"

"How am I to know? It was funny she should happen to

sneak down the stairs the moment my back was turned. Almost as if she had been waiting for me to move away."

"How do you know some one else didn't get down ahead of her? You were talking to me and Lilian for a while. And she's only a slip of a thing. I can't see her flinging a man over her shoulder and running upstairs with him."

"If you've ever been in hospital, and I dare say you have, you'll have seen little wispy nurses heaving about men twice as big as Vasquez. In any case, we don't know he was taken upstairs. He may be somewhere about here still."

"My idea exactly," Michael said. "Let's take a look."

They took a long look, going over the ground twice and then three times to make certain. There was positively no sign of their objective. Sling said, returning to the portion of blood-stained flooring, "Whoever did this job must have been here when Vasquez came in. Why he should come down to the cellar at all is something I can't get round at the moment. Unless he was aiming to have drinks on the house. But that doesn't seem likely, with all his money."

"Why shouldn't some one have knocked him off upstairs, and brought him down here to get rid of him?" Michael suggested.

"It's possible. They could have done it easily while the lights were out. And he was wandering around the corridors like a schoolboy in search of adventure. And God knows, he found it. Perhaps there were two of them. One came down here and switched off the lights—because nothing will convince me that it wasn't deliberately done—and the other settled with Vasquez. Yes, that's quite an idea."

"Listen, Sling," Michael said, suddenly very solemn. "I don't want you to get ideas about this business. I want you to put it out of your mind. Vasquez's dead, and, thank heavens, he's gone. We've nothing more to do with it."

"All very fine. But it hasn't occurred to you, I suppose, that his body may come popping back the same way it went?"

"Why should it? Whoever took it away wanted to remove all evidence, depend upon it. But if they try any tricks—well, I'm staying here to see that they don't. And you're staying with me."

"Mine is a lovely job," Sling said. "I can just imagine how it would sound if you advertised for a substitute. 'Wanted: all-round, willing man. Capable of supervising disappearance of bodies and keeping vigil in case they return to scene of crime.' What's that grating doing there, Mike?"

He indicated a ventilator, some three feet in length, inlet between the brick wall and stone flooring.

"What does it look like but a ventilator?"

"Nothing. And if you think I've any secret desire to play treasure trove, you're wrong. I gave up that sort of thing when I was ten. I'm going to get me another drink."

"Have one with me," Michael offered hospitably. "I'll have to nip upstairs for a minute, to see how Lilian's bearing up."

He had not really the figure to nip, but he did it nevertheless. Once upstairs he straightened his tie, flicked dust from his otherwise immaculate evening dress, and joined the stream of people issuing from the dining-room. Mrs Connolly, sighting him, seized him by the arm and said in a scarcely audible whisper, "Michael! I can't imagine *what* you're doing to-night. You are just all over the place, and you've not settled down once. What *is* the matter?"

"Nothing, dear. It's just your imagination. I have to keep my eye on things."

With a tremendous effort, both mental and physical, he escaped and made his way to the door, where he stood bowing and smiling and shaking hands with those who had left it as late as this to depart. Mrs Connolly joined him, and even a close observer would not have guessed that between them there had ever been the slightest dissension. Miss Page, who had been assisting Ramon with the cloakroom, suddenly emerged and caught Michael by the sleeve. She said in an undertone, "Mr Connolly, there is a lady on the telephone asking if Mr Vasquez has left yet. What shall I say?"

He said to his wife, "Excuse me, dear. Some one on the phone," and quickly detached himself from the chattering group.

"Who is it?" he whispered urgently.

"I don't know," Christina said. "She didn't give her

name. But I think it is a Mrs Schutte, whom I saw with him here one evening. I seemed to recognize her voice."

"Well, tell her he's gone. You don't know what time he left, but he's not here now, so he must have gone. Understand?"

"Yes, I understand," she said. She was very pale, and her voice was not quite steady. She went back to the telephone. He waited for her, and when she had replaced the receiver, asked, "Why are you still around, my dear? I thought you were going straight home."

"I was. But Ramon had so much to do, and with Mr Fitzroberts still chasing spooks . . . Mr Connolly, I don't want you to think me mistrustful, but you're absolutely certain about that business downstairs?"

"Sure as I'm alive. I only wish I wasn't. But you'd have to be far gone on the road to ruin, I'm thinking, to be imagining bodies."

"How did he die, then?"

"A knock on the head. Don't know what with, because there wasn't any weapon, as far as we could see." Then, as a thought flashed into his hard-pressed mind, "Look, Miss Page. You've still got your doubts about it, haven't you? Well, maybe it's best for you to stick to them. Just keep telling yourself that there was nothing down there because you didn't see it and that Sling and I are suffering from D.T.'s. That way you won't run into any trouble if people start asking questions, and you'll feel a whole lot better."

"I'll try," she said, managing a half-smile. She could not help liking Michael, despite his peculiar ways.

"That's a good girl. You run along now and get some sleep. Sling and I will be taking care of things."

"Oh." She hesitated, but went on with determination. "I know it's not really my business, but don't you think you trust people just a little too much?"

"Meaning? . . . Oh, I see. You don't like him, do you?"

"It's not that. I never let my likes or dislikes prejudice me. But I do think you should be careful."

"I will." Momentarily his one eye twinkled at her through the cloud of oppression that had taken hold of him. "It

wouldn't be the first time I've been in and out of trouble, young lady. Good night."

He walked away, his mind a seething mass of confused emotion. Mrs Connolly, he saw to his relief, had gone off to her own room, having supervised the departure of her own personal friends. A few stragglers still remained, but these were in the act of leaving, and he nodded to them in an absent way. He had not liked that last veiled suggestion from Miss Page. What had he to worry about? Everything had cleared itself up nicely. He went into his office and helped himself to a long drink from the bottle she had put upon his desk. But it only half lulled the doubt that was beginning uncomfortably to bother him. Whom *could* he trust in this benighted club, other than himself and his wife? Sling he had always relied upon, but apparently Miss Page did not share that reliance. And Sling had been positively rude over the question of the girl's veracity. Wasn't there anyone who was completely on his side? Thoughtfully he brought out his keys and made a tour of the premises. The staff had all gone now, with the exception of Sling, and everywhere was very quiet. The dining-room had a woebegone, desolate look. He was glad when, his duty done, he was able to make for the cellar again, to discover Sling mounted on top of two empty barrels, solemnly tapping the brickwork. Michael ran a hand through his already ruffled hair. He asked, "What's got into you now?"

"I've been thinking, Mike, is there any other way out of this cellar? It seems a bit tall for anyone to have rushed that body up the stairs and out of the building without some one seeing them, once the lights were on."

"Tall or not, it's what they did. Where would be the sense in another way out of the cellar? We don't have police raids here."

"You mean you haven't up to now."

"Stop talking like that, will you, and get down off there before you break your blasted neck." Morosely he picked up the whisky bottle, found it empty, and with a lowering glance at the younger man, who had just taken a flying leap to the ground, went off in search of the brandy he had lately aban-

doned. Returning a few minutes later, he said, "Everything's all right upstairs, anyway. I saw to it personally. It's all locked, barred, and bolted——"

"Where's the sense in staying here then?" Sling interrupted, wandering idly about, cigarette in hand, as if hoping to find something that had previously escaped their notice.

"Because I'm taking no chances," Michael said, and jumped visibly as a soft rustling noise came to their ears from the direction of the stairs. Watching pop-eyed, he saw his wife appear, and even her expression of deep displeasure could not eradicate his sensation of relief. She said, standing grimly erect upon the bottom stair, "I should like to know exactly what you two are doing down here? Surely you must have repaired that fuse by now?"

Sling, as if he had heard nothing, continued to wander about, poking here and there with a stick he had acquired, and Michael said, "All over and forgotten, dear. It's rats we're after. The place is alive with the plaguy things. Isn't that so, Sling?"

"Absolutely. I found one earlier all covered in blood. Horrible it was, Mrs Connolly. It's high time we had a Rat Week here, and we're starting it now."

But she was apparently immune from the customary feminine fear of rodents. Her look disdainfully took in the two of them, but she addressed herself to her husband.

"Are you absolutely mad, Michael? I'm surprised at you, playing such silly games at your age. What do you pay your staff for if you have to go rat-catching yourself?"

But Michael had reached the end of his endurance. For the first time since their marriage he raised his voice in the presence of his wife, raised it so that it echoed round the cellar and bounced back at them.

"They're my rats, aren't they?" he bellowed. "Mine, d'ye hear? And since they're mine I'll catch 'em in me own sweet time and just how I damn' well please." And he sat down on the edge of a barrel and reached for the almost empty brandy bottle.

His wife stood staring at him for a long moment in silence.

"Michael Connolly," she said at last, with the air of a jurymen pronouncing his verdict, "you're intoxicated." And

turning, she went slowly up the stairs, her evening dress sweeping behind her in awful majesty.

"You've done it, Mike," Sling said, sitting down beside him and reaching for the fresh bottle he had brought to keep the other company. "She'll be mad at you for a week."

Michael stared sullenly ahead of him.

"The devil I care. I'm going to sit right here and see that this damn' body doesn't come back into the cellar the way it damn' well went out. And what will you say to that?"

"Nothing. Except that I consider the idea particularly noisome."

"Meaning?"

"It stinks."

"But you'll not leave me, Sling boy? You'll stick by me, no matter what?"

"Surely," Sling said. "As long as the drink holds out. And that should be for quite a considerable time."

But as far as Michael was concerned the rest of the night proved uneventful. Within an hour his heavy body had slid to the floor, and he lay solidly asleep, emitting snores manful and voluptuous. Sling remained sitting beside him for some time, drinking a little and smoking interminably. Then he rose and went quietly upstairs.

CHAPTER XII

It was eight o'clock in the morning. Flash, confirming the fact by his watch, outwardly yawned and inwardly groaned. He was tired. He had known very little sleep for the past two nights and a great deal of frustration in the past few weeks. And he was at present on what he secretly feared might prove to be a wild-goose chase. As he sat in the police car that bore them through London's early morning traffic he glanced at Olsen and wondered if he were feeling the same. A strange chap, Olsen. He seemed positively to enjoy these involved cases. Flash supposed, on thinking it over, that he got a certain

amount of fun out of them himself, after everything was cleared up and all the details nicely dovetailed one into the other. But just now he could survey the whole thing only with a jaundiced eye. He had a strong urge to arrest every one even remotely connected with the affair and be done with it. He could imagine, with a certain sardonic pleasure, the indignation of those who were innocent if he did. Not that it would get him anywhere. Without substantial evidence the whole lot, innocent and guilty alike, would slip right through his fingers, and this time probably for good. He could not afford to take any chances. He had to go carefully, as carefully as they were now threading their way towards Oxford Street.

He closed his eyes for a few seconds' blissful relaxation. But even with vision obliterated his mind was not at ease. Through the blankness there paraded a series of figures—Michael Connolly and all those associated with him, Tilbury, Vasquez, the mysterious Mrs Schutte, Pete Jennings, Josh Ellis. . . . The last had proved extremely unhelpful, which was only to be expected. He had been obliging in manner, even friendly, but blank to the point of imbecility when it came to any knowledge as to the movements of his clientele. André Caryl? Bluff Bailey? He knew them both, naturally. Who didn't? They even had been in to see him lately. When? Well, he couldn't be sure about that. People were always coming and going. How could anyone hope to keep tapes on them? It might have been two nights ago, three perhaps. They had come in together, had had a few drinks, and had gone out again. Together or separately he didn't know. He rather thought that Bluff had left town and was living in the country.

A likely story, as Flash well knew. The idea of such a confirmed city dweller developing a sudden passion for the country was ludicrous in itself. And how would Bluff make his living against a rural background of buttercups and daisies? But the fact that Josh Ellis had been so deliberately vague held a certain encouragement. One would not expect such a character to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, but his obvious prevarication in this instance might well mean that he had something to hide. Exactly how deep in he was Flash had not yet been able to decide.

When the car, having manœuvred its way through a labyrinth of turnings on the other side of Oxford Street, came to a standstill outside a block of mansion flats Flash alighted with considerable relief. He said to Olsen, who was close behind him, "This is either going to be good or else it'll be very bad. I hope you're prepared for the worst."

"I am," Olsen said. "This place looks dreary enough for anything."

The block of dwellings known as Ellerman Chambers was not prepossessing. It was one of those red-brick Victorian buildings that look as though they house a grudge against life itself. And the London dirt that had encrusted itself upon the surface, year by year, did nothing to alleviate the general aspect of depression. They pushed open the outer doors and discovered a long, cold stone passage, off which doors opened left and right, and at the end of which was a stone staircase and iron balustrade leading to the floors above. They mounted, Flash in front, to the second floor, traversed another corridor, and halted outside a door marked No. 22. Flash knocked, waited for the silence he guessed would follow, and knocked again. A faint noise came from within, suggestive of some one undecided whether to open the door or tell the intruder to go to the devil. Apparently the former course was chosen, for the door was flung open at last by a man who stood and leant against it, one hand on the jamb, eyes peering obliquely. He was of medium height and indefinite age, with a pallid, unshaven face and tousled hair. He stared at the two visitors without any sign of recognition or pleasure. Flash said, "Good morning, Bluff. I expect you remember me. May we come in?"

He was already half in the door, and Olsen followed close upon his heels. A slow smile spread over the homely features of Bluff Bailey, and he stood to one side and closed the door after them. He said, "I remember all right. Scotland Yard, isn't it? What can I do for you gentlemen?"

He had a pleasant voice with a slight Cockney intonation. He was dressed roughly in shirt and trousers, and looked as if he had not long left his bed. Flash gave a quick mechanical glance round the room and sat down. Olsen did the same.

The room was only roughly furnished with an old-fashioned iron bedstead, the clothes tumbled half upon the floor, a chest of drawers, a wardrobe, a table, the veneer of which was badly scratched, and several odd chairs. The walls were whitewashed and inclined to dampness, and the floor was covered in worn linoleum and a few feet of threadbare carpet. On the table were the remains of breakfast and a newspaper propped against a cracked teapot. From the bricked-in fireplace a gas-fire made a futile effort to warm the general chilliness. Flash said, "That depends on how you're feeling. If you like to tell us, just comfortably between ourselves and without any frills, what you've been doing in, say, the last two weeks, we're all going to get along very nicely. If not. . . ." He shrugged his shoulders. Bluff Bailey slid into a chair on the other side of the table, brought out a crumpled packet of cigarettes, and lit one with a steady hand. He seemed in no way put out, a fact which Flash observed without any satisfaction.

"The last fortnight, you say? Well, now, let's see. I've been here a week. But you know that. You'll have seen Mrs Eccles, and she'll have told you the exact day I arrived. Am I right?"

Flash inclined his head. His interview with the housekeeper had not been very illuminating. Mr Bailey had taken the flat on a weekly basis, paying her two weeks' rent in advance, and had been in residence exactly eight days. He had told her that he might not be there for long, but she did not mind that as she had another, more permanent tenant in view, who could not take the place until the end of the month. Mr Bailey was a quiet, well-mannered gentleman and had given her no trouble. Flash wished that he could say the same.

"And before that?" he prompted.

"I've been in the country. I can give you the address if you're interested. An aunt of mine has a little place in Kent. . . ."

"She keeps chickens, I take it?"

"And ducks," Bluff said gravely. "And she cooks like a fairy. You ought to try the country some time, Inspector. The peace of it is something wonderful."

"I know of other places as peaceful," Flash said. "What brought you back to town?"

"A Londoner always comes back, sooner or later. You ought to know that. But you didn't come to give me an official welcome from the Yard, did you? I'm not as popular as all that."

Flash did not immediately reply, and Olsen picked up the newspaper, glanced at it, and put it down again. He remarked, "Glad to see you take the *Envoy*. It's my favourite paper. Just now, at any rate."

"A nice conservative paper," Bluff agreed. "I've always stood for the *status quo*, and always will. None of this low-brow stuff for me."

"You're something of a highbrow, aren't you?" Flash cut in. "A man with a strong feeling for art. That's how we came to think of you when Sir Meredith's two pictures recently walked."

Bluff twisted his face into an expression of convincing surprise, convincing, that is, to anyone who did not know him.

"Are you in charge of that job? Funny, I was reading about it when you blew in. You haven't got him yet, have you? The man with the twitching mouth, they're calling him now. That ought to make him twitch all the more, knowing he's a marked man. I shouldn't be surprised if you pick him up without much trouble."

"I shouldn't be surprised either," Flash said. "What were you doing between the hours of three and four on the afternoon of February eighteenth?"

"Why drag me into it? I don't twitch."

"You could. Come on, Bluff, if you've got an alibi, let's have it. We're wasting a lot of time."

"Half a minute. It's not so easy, thinking up just where you were at a certain time. I bet you'd have to think a bit. I've got it. I was having a drink at the Scarecrow Club in Denman Street. I expect you know it. Your boys drop in every so often."

"Did you see anyone you know?"

"Every one and a few more. They'll all back me up."

"I don't doubt it," Flash said, and glanced at Olsen.

Although their faces were expressionless they were both thinking the same thing. An alibi like that wouldn't amount to much if they could get a really concrete case. Bluff went on.

"But what's the use of us talking like this? Use your loaf, Inspector. What would I do with a couple of pictures?"

"You might sell them," Flash suggested.

"Pictures of cows? I might, if I could find anyone mug enough to take 'em."

"How did you know they were cows?"

"It was all in the papers, wasn't it? Cattle, they said. Pictures of cattle. I ask you, has that ever been my line?"

"They might have been bulls," Flash said.

"Bulls or cows, what's the difference in a picture? These painting coves don't worry about a little thing like that. No, if I was on the crook I'd like something easy, something you could break up and twist around with no one any the wiser. But I've given up. The way you fellows go to work isn't funny any more. I'm on the straight now, and that's the truth."

"Straight as a corkscrew. And talking of corkscrews, you had a little celebration at Josh's place the other night, I understand. The night before the cows disappeared."

Bluff's eyes narrowed and he looked at the detective quickly. It was the first time he had shown any embarrassment. But he said, recovering on the instant, "I was there, yes. Just dropped in for a drink or two for old time's sake. You've been following me around quite a bit, haven't you?"

"Quite a bit," Flash agreed. He rose suddenly to his feet. Even if his mind had needed making up, Bluff Bailey's change of front would have done the trick. "We'll continue this talk elsewhere, and there are one or two things you're going to find difficult to explain. Now if you don't mind. . . ."

"All right," Bluff said. "I'm not going to make a fuss. Why should I? There's nothing I can lose. But you're wasting your time. Hold on a minute while I get dressed."

He had risen and was about to dive into the inner room, but Flash was before him. It was a small dressing-room and bathroom, and contained nothing but an old-world bath, the enamel of which was peeling badly, a medicine chest with a

mirror for shaving, and an adjacent lavatory and wash-basin. Outside the windows ran a narrow ledge overlooking a sheer drop of some fifty feet to the area below. Bluff said with a grin, "I'm not aiming to die yet, if that's what you're thinking," and ran water into the basin. Flash made no comment and returned to Olsen, and together they made a systematic search of the apartment, which did not take long owing to its limited size. Bluff Bailey was carrying very little in the way of impedimenta, and nothing at all of an incriminating nature. Two suits, a change or so of underwear, two pairs of shoes, toilet requisites, a few books, mostly stories of the Turf in paper covers. If he had ever possessed a plumber's equipment he had dumped it elsewhere. It was while Flash was standing on a somewhat unstable chair inspecting the top of the wardrobe that his equilibrium was nearly upset by a sharp exclamation from his colleague.

"Were those pictures ever publicly exhibited?" the latter asked.

"I think so. Why?" Flash came down from the chair to peer over the shoulder of the younger man at the object lying in the palm of his hand—a small round ticket with the number 126 printed on it in red, the kind of ticket used in a gallery to number the exhibits.

"Where did you find it?" Flash asked.

"It had slipped down under this bit of loose linoleum. Do you think . . .?"

"I do. Keep a tight hold on that while we have another scout round."

But they found nothing further of importance. Two suitcases, labelled with the names of various hotels, English and foreign, were empty. So were most of the drawers in the chest. Bluff Bailey, who had been moving to and fro collecting various items of apparel, viewed their industry with a certain sardonic amusement, but said nothing until he presently emerged ready for the street. He had washed, shaved, and changed, and had somehow contrived to look like a long-established and highly respected employee of some public institution. Flash was not surprised. He had seen men of Bluff's type ring the changes too often for him to be surprised

at anything. Bluff grinned. He seemed completely to have recovered his equanimity.

"Found anything, Inspector? It's a nice easy room to strip, isn't it? No wallpaper, not much on the floor, no pictures. . . ."

"You're not interested in pictures? You wouldn't bother to go round the galleries, for instance?"

"No fear. Not me. A one-and-sixpenny seat at a flick is more my mark."

"That's what I thought," Flash said, and showed no desire to linger any further.

As they crossed Oxford Street on their way back to the Yard his train of thought was interrupted by the glimpse of a young man standing on the edge of the pavement reading a newspaper, apparently oblivious to the people passing *en route* for work and sundry other occupations. Flash turned in his seat as they sped by and confirmed his first impression. It was Fitzroberts, hatless, his evening dress beneath an open overcoat looking out of place in the prosaic morning light. He had, in fact, the appearance of a man who has been up all night, a point which Flash duly noted and mentally filed away for possible future reference.

But back at the Yard all thought of Mr Fitzroberts and his nocturnal habits was suddenly eclipsed and even Bluff Bailey became of secondary importance. For in his absence a report had come in that the body of a man identified as Dominico Vasquez had been discovered in an empty apartment at 27 Andover Street, Mayfair.

CHAPTER XIII

CHRISTINA PAGE had been unable to sleep. Not that there had been much left of the night when she returned home at 3 A.M., but she was getting used to late hours and was accustomed, after a bath and some light refreshment, to turn in to bed and relax in the sleep that is the due of one who has just completed a full night's work.

But on this occasion it was nearly half-past five before she drifted into any kind of slumber, and then it was achieved only with the aid of three aspirin tablets and several glasses of cold water. All of which was so unlike her that it worried her as much as the loss of her rest. Furthermore, her dreams were weird and wild, and several times she awoke with a stifled cry and with sweat dampening her forehead. Finally, towards 9.30, she was startled into consciousness by the shrill ringing of the telephone bell. That doubtful benefit to civilization was a legacy from the previous tenant, who, she understood from the landlord, had departed in a hurry. She had retained it, feeling that the additional expense was outweighed by the novel sense of luxury it gave her. Now, as she groped for the receiver, which was conveniently situated beside her bed, she asked herself, in a dim kind of way, whether she had been wise in keeping it. Her eyes were still half closed and her head suffused by an appalling numbness as she murmured, "Hallo," and sank back upon her pillows, clutching the receiver to her ear. The whole situation seemed to be part of a nightmare from which she had been trying to escape. A woman's voice, low and rather hoarse, startled her by its apparent nearness.

"Is that Miss Page?"

Christina admitted that it was, and forced open her eyes to view with disgust the hands of her watch pointing to twenty-five minutes past nine. Who on-earth could be so heartless, base, and altogether unfeeling as to telephone her at this time of the morning? The voice went on, "I telephoned last night to Connolly's, just before you closed. I think I spoke to you, in fact I know I did. I asked if Señor Vasquez was there, and you said he'd already left. Was that strictly true?"

Christina just lay and pondered for a moment. It was not yet nine-thirty, she had been in bed not more than four hours, and they were starting on her already. Mrs Schutte—she had recognized the voice now—was wanting to know what had happened to Señor Vasquez. Well, what *had* happened to him? He was dead, wasn't he? Or was he? Her mind, tired, befogged, and without any stimulant, refused to concentrate. She was suddenly very angry. She said, "I'm sorry, but I can't

tell you any more than I did last night. Señor Vasquez came and went, and that is all I know."

"Did you see him?"

"No. But Mr Connolly——"

"Connolly?" the woman cut in. "You went and asked him, then, when I telephoned? And he said Señor Vasquez had gone. But had he really, that's what I'm trying to get at. Or was he still around somewhere?"

"I don't know," Chris said wearily. "But almost every one had gone home when I left."

"And he didn't tell you where he was going?"

"I didn't *see* him, Mrs Schutte. And if I had, why should he tell me where he was going?"

"How do you know my name?"

"The same way that you know mine," Chris submitted, and heard the click of the receiver as it was hung up. Well, she supposed she had made rather a mess of that, but what could anyone expect? Who was this Mrs Schutte, anyway? Not even a member, so there was no reason why she should expect civility from the staff at all hours of the morning, especially within the privacy of their own homes. In any case, it was all too confusing for her to work out just then. She turned on her side and buried her head into the pillows and made further efforts towards oblivion. But this time sleep had gone for good, and after about half an hour she rose, donned a wrapper over her pyjamas, switched on the electric fire, and went into the kitchenette to prepare a pot of tea strong enough to aid her nerves to recuperation. She made herself toast under the miniature grill, and returned presently to sit on the bed, the tray beside her, imbibing refreshment without much enthusiasm.

It was, she considered, no time to be having breakfast. Rightfully she should sleep at least until midday, otherwise how was she going to face the club to-night? She would be looking and feeling ghastly. If only that annoying woman had not taken it into her head to telephone. And what a curious kind of call to make. That side of it was only now beginning to penetrate her consciousness. Perhaps she had made some sort of an appointment with Vasquez, which of

course he had failed to keep. It seemed rather odd to take a receptionist into her confidence, but then Mrs Schutte was not the kind of woman to stand on ceremony. Or perhaps she already knew of Vasquez's death, and was trying to establish her ignorance of it.

"Nonsense," Christina said aloud. "If I go on like this I shall drive myself crazy. Perhaps I am crazy, and I just imagined all that last night . . ." She stopped abruptly, remembering what people said of those who commune with themselves, and having finished her breakfast, took herself off to the bathroom, which she miraculously found disengaged. A hot bath, long-drawn-out and comforting, did much to restore her sense of balance, and she returned to make an unhurried toilet, after which she tidied the flat, for though service was included in the rent it was of the most casual and unpredictable kind. She felt better then, and sat down to write a letter to her mother in Shropshire. But somehow a glossed-over account of her present life sounded unreal and inadequate on paper, and she did not feel disposed to impart the real truth. How would it sound?

"Dear Mother. . . . My new job is very interesting. Last night we found a body in the cellar. . . ."

No, she couldn't write to-day. She must put it off until she was feeling more normal. Whatever she said in her present mood would be unsatisfactory. Mothers had an unfortunate way of reading between the lines. She put aside her pen and writing-pad and tried to read. But there was a strained feeling at the back of her eyes, and her mind had a disposition to wander. She decided, round about one o'clock, that a walk would do her good. Then she could come back, have a light lunch, and sleep for the greater part of the afternoon.

She was in the act of reaching for a coat when the door-bell rang. It was a clamorous kind of bell, out of all proportion to the size of the flat, and the sudden violence of it caused her heart to leap painfully. It was absurd, of course. She was not accustomed to callers, but there was no reason to be nervous because one had chanced to appear, particularly at this time of the day. It was probably some one for the flat above ringing her bell by mistake. The door of the main entrance

was kept open during the daytime, but people did occasionally confuse one flat with another, even though the names were clearly marked. It might even be the postman. Or a policeman. The unpleasant thought came to her, and was immediately dismissed. Firmly she walked to the door and flung it wide.

A man stood there, leaning with one shoulder against the wall, his back towards the light. He wore a loosely hanging overcoat and a soft dark hat pulled over one eye, and for the moment she failed to recognize him. Then he removed the hat and she saw that it was Sling.

"Hallo," he said, "just up?" And the nervous tension of a moment ago turned to justifiable annoyance.

"What brought *you* here?" she asked, without any welcome in her voice.

"A taxi. Aren't you going to ask me in? You needn't worry about the landlady. They always adore me."

"Why have you come here?" she repeated. "And how did you know my address?"

It had just occurred to her that in the general turmoil she had forgotten to tell Michael of her change of residence. Not that it was important. But she had also avoided giving her new address to the proprietress of the hostel where she had lately lived, since she was not on the best of terms with that lady. In any case the latter, even had she possessed such knowledge, would hardly have passed it on to a strange young man. She was the kind of woman who does not approve of strange young men, particularly when they are trying to trace young women. Sling said, "Does it matter? I wanted to talk to you, alone and uninterrupted, and here I am. And the sort of things I want to say can't be said on a public staircase."

"I was just going out," she began, but moved hesitantly to one side, and he walked past her into the room, flung his hat on the nearest chair, and went over to the window. Closing the door, she saw him give a quick glance up and down the street, and moved to join him. She saw nothing in the scene below to arouse any interest. He turned away, and meeting her look of inquiry, laughed.

"I was just admiring the view. Cigarette?"

She accepted one and the light he offered and sat down on the edge of the table, watching him roam restlessly about the apartment, his dark eyes making a rapid survey of everything. He even put his head round the open door of the kitchenette, afterwards coming back to regard her thoughtfully. She said then, in exasperation, "Have you come here to talk or just to look? And while you're looking, what about the divan? There might be some one under there, or even in the wardrobe."

"Too near the ground," he said. "And a wardrobe isn't a practical place to hide. I know. I've tried it."

"Perhaps you'll tell me then just what all this is about?"

"Certainly." He flopped down into an armchair facing her, swung his legs over the side, and closed his eyes for a moment. Opening them again, he asked, "How did you sleep last night?"

"Hardly at all. Did you?"

"No. We sat up in the cellar. At least, I did. Mike lay there snoring like a hippopotamus with adenoids. Never marry a man who snores, Miss Page. It must be agony."

"Mr Fitzroberts," she said, "I've no doubt your experiences and opinions and so on are highly diverting, but at the moment I've neither the time nor patience to listen to them." He had closed his eyes again, but she had the feeling that he was observing her from under his eyelashes. She added, on a note of supreme irritability, "Are you sure you're quite comfortable?"

"Perfectly, thanks. I could do with a cushion behind my head, but we'll let that pass." He glanced up. "Miss Page, how deep are you in on this business?"

"What business?"

"Tilbury, Vasquez, Magda Schutte. . . ."

"Frankly, I haven't the slightest idea what you mean. Who is Tilbury?"

"Was, not is. He died just before you came to Connolly's. Personally, I think he was deliberately put out of the way, the same as Vasquez."

"You still insist upon that?"

"I may not be the brightest boy in the class," he said, "but

when I find a dead man with a bash on the head that hasn't done him any good I naturally assume he's been murdered."

She crushed out the end of her cigarette and rose decisively to her feet. She said, "I'm afraid I can't discuss that any further. I promised Mr Connolly I would forget all about it, and that is what I intend to do."

"How like Michael. Burying his head in the sand, as usual. Here." He felt in his coat-pocket and produced a folded newspaper, which he flung upon the table. "I take it you haven't seen the midday Press."

Reluctantly she took it, spread it out on the table before her, and frowned down upon a bold headline:

MAYFAIR MYSTERY—DEAD MAN FOUND IN
EMPTY APARTMENT

The hand that clutched the paper shook a little as she read on. According to a zealous crime reporter, the body of a man, identified as one Dominico Vasquez, had been found that morning in a ground-floor apartment at 27 Andover Street, Mayfair. The apartment in question had been rented by the dead man on a quarterly basis, but the caretaker stated that he used it only very occasionally. The discovery had been made by a charwoman, who came once a week to keep the rooms aired and dusted. Her suspicions were first aroused by finding the front-door key already in the lock when she arrived to perform her duties. On entering, she made a careful tour of inspection, during which she saw the dead man lying on the ground in the kitchen. The door was neither locked nor bolted, and the window, which was open, appeared to have been forced from the outside. On the sideboard in the lounge was a bottle of whisky, half full, and an empty glass. There was no indication of any struggle having taken place. She had immediately informed the caretaker, who telephoned to the police. It had now been established that death was due to a blow on the head caused by a heavy, blunt instrument. . . .

She did not read any further, but sat down on the nearest chair and looked at Sling blankly.

"It's horrible," she said. He shrugged his shoulders.

"No more than I expected. When a body disappears it's

bound to turn up somewhere else sooner or later. At least, that's how it seemed to me. Did you get that about the robbery motive?"

"No. I didn't read it all. I couldn't."

He reached over and picked up the newspaper again.

"They're hinting that some one may have broken into the flat and attacked him for his money, because he hadn't any on him when he was found. That's odd, isn't it? Because when he was in the cellar he had three hundred pounds in banknotes stuffed into his wallet."

"How do you know?"

"I went through his pockets. And you needn't look at me like that. I was simply trying to find out a little more about this mysterious gentleman. After all, people don't get knocked off at the club every day of the week. I found something else, too. D'you recognize that writing?"

He brought out of his pocket a slip of notepaper and handed it to her. She looked at it dubiously.

"I don't know the writing, but it's my address."

"And it's Vasquez's writing. I compared it with his signature in the visitors' book. It was in his waistcoat-pocket. He was very interested in you, wasn't he?"

"And if he was? I can't see that just because you're sufficiently unprincipled to search a dead man's pockets it gives you the right to question me."

"Principles be damned! It was lucky for you that I did. Otherwise the police might be here now. Or perhaps whoever removed Vasquez would also have removed that slip of paper?"

She was silent, staring down at the floor. Her hands were cold, and her head felt as if a gigantic weight were pressing upon it. A strange series of images passed through her mind. Vasquez, small and dapper, smiling and nodding his head in the funny way he had. Mrs Schutte, coarse and colourful, her voice inclined to truculence over the telephone. The police, whom until now she had regarded as a body of men employed solely to direct traffic and help you to find hidden streets in out-of-the-way places. Would they really question her about her brief association with the dead man? What

would she say if they did? Nothing. There wasn't anything to say. She had hardly known him. But would it look like that? There was some weird tangle here into which she seemed to be getting deeper and deeper, and having no knowledge of what it was, she could not think how to extricate herself. Michael had told her to forget all about it. Did he know any more than she did? She asked suddenly, "Does Mr Connolly know about this?" and indicated the newspaper.

"I got him on the phone just now. He's in a hell of a state. But he thinks if we sit tight and say nothing everything will be fine. I think he's wrong. I was on my way home to bath and change this morning when I saw our friend Flash, the C.I.D. merchant, flying by in a police car. He turned and gave me a dirty look. I shouldn't be surprised to see him to-night at the club. That is, if they can check up on Vasquez and find that he came along. And I dare say they can."

"And then?"

"The devil only knows. We'll have to admit that he arrived, but no one can prove he went out feet first. . . . That's the way Mike hopes it'll work out, at any rate."

"There's no reason why it shouldn't. Unless you have any more tricks up your sleeve."

"Such as . . .?"

"That piece of paper."

"Oh, that." He brought out his cigarette lighter, carefully set fire to the paper bearing her address, watched while it burned, and dropped the remains into the ash-tray. Then he rose and leaned with both hands upon the table. "Miss Page, did you ever go to that apartment in Andover Street?"

"If I had, do you really think I should tell you?"

"You might, in certain circumstances."

"You're quite wrong. In no circumstances would I tell you anything."

He lit a cigarette and began to pace about the room. He said, "All right. Have it your own way. Let's forget the whole thing. Let's say Vasquez isn't dead. He's still a member of Connolly's, and he's still interested in you and likely to ring up at any minute. . . ."

The telephone rang. She rose quickly, clutching the edge of the table. She was very pale and her eyes had a shadowy look from loss of sleep. He had turned to face her, faintly smiling. He asked, "Well, aren't you going to answer it?"

With obvious reluctance she went across to the little table on which the telephone stood, sat down on the edge of the divan, and lifted the receiver. Her voice was flat and mechanical as she announced the number.

"Miss Page?" It was Magda Schutte again. With relief she recognized the harsh tones, and was annoyed to find that her hands were unsteady. "Are you alone?"

"No," she said. "Not exactly."

"What do you mean by that? What are you doing?" the woman asked sharply, and there was something in the questioning voice and its insistence that inflamed Christina to irrepressible wrath. She said, "Minding my own business," and waited for the other to hang up. There followed a long silence, and she glanced up to observe Sling leaning against the table, laughing silently. She frowned and looked away. Mrs Schutte's voice came again, and now it was less demanding, almost persuasive.

"Good. I want you to go on doing that, Miss Page. I want you to forget I've ever phoned you. If Connolly wants to know who it was rang up last night, don't tell him anything. You don't know me, you've only seen me once, you can't even remember what I look like, if anyone asks you. Got all that? I'll make it worth your while."

"You seem to be under the impression," Chris said, "that I'm a private secretary in a public kind of way."

"All right, all right," the woman cut in. "I know that kind of talk. It doesn't get you anywhere and just relieves your feelings. And if you're trying to tell me you're not the sort of girl who takes money from strangers, save your breath. I'll give you a hundred quid to do as I say. Don't do as I say and I can make things pretty uncomfortable for you. I'll get in touch with you as soon as I think it's safe. Good-bye."

Slowly Chris hung up the receiver. Sling said, "What's she trying to do? Pick a quarrel with you over the body of Mr Vasquez? What fun you girls do have."

"How did you know it was a woman?"

"She wasn't exactly whispering. And if men are beginning to talk like that there's room for a great deal of improvement in the species. It was Mrs Schutte, wasn't it? She must be feeling pretty low, having just lost her boy friend. You might have commiserated with her a little."

She rose and walked across to the window and stared down into the street, which was deserted except for a solitary youth riding by on a bicycle. People would be lunching now, ordinary, sensible people eating prosaic things. She felt slightly hungry too, but she couldn't eat. She could not imagine ever eating again. It was not so much hunger she felt as a kind of sick emptiness inside. Normally at this time she would be preparing her midday meal, with nothing on her mind other than the problem of what to wear for the evening. It made her smile in a half-hearted way to think of such things. Connolly's? She was beginning to wish that she had never seen or heard of it. Why couldn't she have chosen for herself a comfortable, orthodox kind of job, something where you put in so many hours a day and forgot about it the moment you were off duty? Connolly's Club didn't allow you any leisure. It followed you around, waking or sleeping, thrust its members into your private life, complicated your whole existence. There was something positively sinister about the whole place. She had sensed it that first night she had seen Vasquez there. And now he was dead. She shivered, and upon an impulse glanced over her shoulder. Sling had moved silently to stand behind her. He said, "Anything of interest down there, Miss Page? You seem very absorbed."

She edged away from him and walked over to the door.

"If you had any sensitivity at all," she said, "you'd realize that I'm tired of talking to you, tired of looking at you, and that I'm just waiting for you to go."

"Is that all? I've been thrown out of a number of places, but never so politely." He retrieved his hat and followed her, but before she could open the door he took her nearest hand and held it for a moment, surveying her critically the while. Releasing it, he said, "Your nerves are bad, Miss Page. Why

don't you turn it in to-night? Better still, why don't you chuck Connolly's altogether? There must be dozens of jobs a girl like you could do. And meantime, if you need any money. . . ."

Furiously she seized the handle and flung the door wide. She said, "For some reason you've never wanted me at the club, have you? And now you're even more anxious to be rid of me than you were. Well, I'm not leaving. If Mr Connolly wants me to, I'll go, and not before. I was getting along nicely before all this started. Why can't people leave me alone? Why do they keep offering me money. . . .?"

She stopped abruptly, but he was quick to take advantage of her outburst.

"Who else? Vasquez and old Schutte, I'll lay you a pound to a penny."

"Even if I did need money," she said, on a more restrained note, "I wouldn't take it from you."

He stood for a moment eyeing her, his head a little to one side. He said then, "Either you're a very unusual person, Miss Page, or else you're a perishing liar. In any case, you'd do well to think over what I said."

She did not wait to see him go, but closed the door with an air of complete finality.

CHAPTER XIV

To Flash, the death of Dominico Vasquez had come as an unpleasant surprise, upsetting his carefully built-up case and forcing him to start at the beginning again. For it was now extremely doubtful that Vasquez could have had anything to do with the death of Tilbury. Far more likely was the inference that some other person, as yet unknown, was responsible for the sudden exit from life of both of them.

The apartment in Andover Street had become the scene of much activity. Photographs had been taken, the rooms combed for finger-prints, footprints, evidence of any kind.

And there were many items that were at once illuminating and paradoxical. The reason for the dead man's spasmodic tenancy became clear after the caretaker had been questioned. She did not know Señor Vasquez very well, having only seen him on a few occasions. But on each of these he had been accompanied by a different young woman, usually a blonde. On the night before the murder was discovered she had returned home late from a theatre she had attended. The time was about 11.30, and she went through the main entrance to reach her basement flat in the back premises. The curtains of the front windows in Señor Vasquez's apartment were undrawn, and she saw no lights or anything to suggest that it might be occupied.

She had retired some time after midnight, but had been awakened later by the sound of something being dropped above her head. That would, Flash had discovered, have been in Vasquez's lounge. There had followed a series of muffled noises like some one moving about, and she had assumed that he was spending the night there. The time was then 2.15, because she had looked at her clock to make sure. She had never quite approved of Señor Vasquez, and she approved even less of being disturbed in her sleep. She had, however, thought no more about it until next morning, when, at 9.20, the charwoman had come rushing out with her incoherent story.

According to the police surgeon's report Vasquez had been dead for at least nine hours when found. That would fix his death in the vicinity of midnight. Presumably, then, the murderer, having settled with the victim, had spent an odd two hours alone with him in the apartment, a circumstance at which Flash sceptically shook his head. The rooms, although well furnished, had contained nothing of any value so far as the caretaker knew, and even if they had it would hardly take anyone two hours to find it. In any case, there was no sign of anything having been disturbed. The robbery motive could not, however, be ruled out entirely, for on the previous day Vasquez had drawn three hundred pounds from his bank and when the police took over he had had on him nothing more valuable than a couple of visiting cards, his passport, and some odd silver. But again, it would

not have taken very long to annex three hundred pounds from a man long past resistance.

The position of the body, as it lay on the tiled kitchen floor, had also caused Flash much dissatisfaction.

"If I were a really conscientious man," he said to Olsen, "I'd get you to hit me over the head to see how I'd fall. But I've got a better use for my brain, and it tells me he wouldn't be out stiff like that. And the blood from his head should have left some mark on the floor."

Throughout the flat were many finger-prints, none very clear, except those of Vasquez which they found on the whisky bottle and the empty glass upon the sideboard. Here again Flash pursed his lips and looked dubious. For there was only one set of clearly defined finger-prints on the glass, and even if a man takes his drink neat and in one gulp he must surely handle the glass more than once in the process of pouring out.

The key in the front door presented another problem. It was attached to a ring on which were other keys, each labelled. It might, of course, have been left in the door by Vasquez himself on entering, but, on the other hand, anyone getting hold of that bunch would have immediate access to the apartment. And anyone having recently committed a murder might well leave a key in the front door, particularly if making their exit by the back way, as the unlocked kitchen door would seem to indicate.

At first glance the thick pile of the wine-coloured lounge carpet seemed to bear telling footprints, but it was soon apparent that these too were unsatisfactory. There were those of a medium-sized shoe with a highish heel turning slightly over, which had been identified as those of the charwoman. There were smaller ones, also feminine and approximately size four with a definitely high heel. There were also those of a man's blunt-toed shoe, size nine. But Vasquez had small feet and had worn a seven with a somewhat pointed toe, and of such footprints there was no sign. How then did he alone manage to enter the lounge, help himself to a drink, and go out again, without leaving any trace other than the too-obvious finger-prints? It was a full week since the charwoman

had been in to perform her duties, and on these occasions she was accustomed to run the sweepér over the whole of the carpet area, "just to keep things fresh." She was very definite upon that point. Again Flash was inclined to scepticism, but he had to rely on some one's testimony, and since she appeared well satisfied with her job there was no particular reason to doubt the truth of her statement. Unless, therefore, Vasquez had walked in on tiptoe, it was reasonable to suppose that he had come in by some other method. Upon the parquet flooring in the hall were indistinct marks that might have been made by the heels of shoes dragged across the threshold. There was also the faintest indication of a blood-stain.

It could have been made by the assailant, but there was no clear reason why the person in question should have returned to that part of the hall.

"I think," Flash said finally, "that it's a plant." And Olsen was in complete agreement.

But who could have found it necessary to eliminate Vasquez in some other part of the metropolis and bring him to his own apartment to be rid of him? It seemed reasonable to assume that at 11.30 the apartment was, in fact, empty as the caretaker had supposed. For when the charwoman arrived in the morning the curtains of the lounge, in the front of the house, were drawn, presumably so that the movements of the one who drew them could not be seen from outside. That, if they were anywhere near right, had taken place round about 2.15, the time when the caretaker was awakened. The murder had been committed approximately at midnight. How had the intervening two hours been employed?

There was no lack of suspects. Many people might have had a motive to murder a man in Vasquez's position. There was Bluff Bailey for one. If he had been employed by Vasquez in the recent art robbery, it was possible that they had fallen out over one thing or another. They might have had an appointment late the previous night, and having seen fit to do away with his employer, what more natural than that, having obtained the keys, Bluff should have hit upon the idea of depositing the body in the man's own apartment?

But Flash did not think it very likely. For one thing Bluff

had large feet and took size ten in shoes, and for another, if he had planted the body, how did he get it there? Inquiries on foot among local taxi-drivers had so far failed to yield any result. And it was doubtful whether Bluff, for all his faults, would ever turn murderer. Needless to say, he had strenuously denied all knowledge of the dead man, he had interminable alibis for the whole of the day prior to the murder, and, according to his own statement, had returned home at one o'clock in the morning to enjoy the sleep of the innocent. While he could not give much credence to the latter assertion, Flash was inclined definitely to rule out Bluff from his list of suspects. Meanwhile he was still holding that incorrigible character on suspicion of complicity in the Park Lane art theft.

Information gleaned to date regarding Vasquez was not very helpful. He was forty-two, had been born in Mexico City, was married but separated from his wife, a French actress residing in Paris. There were no details concerning him at the Criminal Record Office at Scotland Yard, neither had the South American police anything definite against him. He had been, at one time, part owner of a gold mine, and had made a considerable amount of money in selling his shares before he came to England. It seemed that afterwards he had indulged in a luxurious orgy of spending and a certain amount of speculation, which had evidently not proved very successful, for at the time of his death his financial position was not an enviable one. He had resided at various hotels, the last being the Hotel Rouen, where he had lived for the past two months. The apartment in Andover Street had been leased to him for nearly a year.

Checking his movements on the day prior to his death, it was found that he had left the Hotel Rouen just after one o'clock in a taxi. The taximan concerned, whom the police had located without much difficulty, stated that he had driven his fare to the bank, where it was ascertained he had collected the three hundred pounds now missing, and from there to the Dorsingham Grill, where, according to the head waiter, who knew him well, he had lunched alone. Afterwards he had taken another taxi to the Art Treasures Emporium. Inquiries there elicited the fact that Miss Montague was at lunch when

he arrived. Mr Budd, very much put out at this further police inquiry, and its circumstances, said that his employer had been in an equable mood and had not stayed very long. He had inquired after current sales, had waited while Mr Budd dealt with a customer, and had taken his departure, saying that he would call in again when he had time. In the possession of the police was the key to the Emporium safe, but it contained nothing more interesting than papers in connexion with the business and a negligible sum of money. To Miss Montague fell the task of banking the proceeds, which she performed rigorously each day. It would seem, therefore, that the missing three hundred pounds was, without question, at present in the hands of the person to whom Vasquez owed his untimely end.

From the Emporium he had returned to his hotel and at about 7.30 had dressed for dinner, had descended from his rooms to the cocktail bar, where he had partaken of several drinks. He had then ridden in a taxi to the address of Mrs Magda Schutte, and later they had left together and dined at a West End restaurant, after which they had parted, she to return home and he to pay a visit to Connolly's Club. The time was then approximately 10.30, and it was here that the trail ended and Flash began to get hot under the collar. For where was the sense in having a man tailed if the police suddenly lost him? That he had entered Connolly's there could be no doubt, but how had he contrived to make his exit without observation? The side-entrance seemed to Flash to present the best answer. Furthermore, it would seem that Vasquez knew he was being shadowed and had deliberately used the club as a means of subterfuge. An urgent inquiry at Connolly's was indicated, but more urgent still was an interview with Mrs Schutte. That lady undoubtedly was now so far involved in the general scheme of things that her personal testimony was imperative.

It was well past eight o'clock in the evening when Flash and Olsen arrived at 15A Camborne Street, and pressed the bell of the black-painted door next to the Washwhite Laundry. There was no immediate response, and Flash and Olsen looked at each other in silent eloquence. Then they looked back at

the door and observed that a small glass plate above Mrs Schutte's name had become illuminated from within. And upon the plate were the welcome words, "Enter, please."

"Natty," Flash said, in admiration for a gadget which, operating from within the flat above, opened the front door and precluded the necessity of anyone descending. Obediently they entered, and the door automatically swung to. The hall was gently lighted, and they ascended immaculate, well-carpeted stairs. At the top was a landing, and a single door bearing a brass plate engraved, "Mrs Magda Schutte. Please Ring." They rang, and the door was instantly opened by a young Chinese girl in neat uniform, who regarded them in silent inquiry.

"Detective-Inspectors Flash and Olsen, C.I.D.," the former said, and presented a card. She took the card, inspected it, murmured something unintelligible, and withdrew, to return a few minutes later with an invitation to enter. They followed her, and registered inner astonishment at the magnificence of the interior, a magnificence of which the outside of the building gave no sign. The premises were larger than one would expect, and the furnishing was undoubtedly expensive.

They were shown into a long, low-ceilinged room, warmed by an enormous electric fireplace radiating its exotic glow with pleasant generosity. The walls and ceiling were tinted to the faintest shade of pink, the furniture, in sharp contrast, was of ebony, the carpet was a deep purple, with pile so thick that it muffled the heaviest footfall. At the windows purple velvet curtains hung to the ground, shutting out the night's bleakness, and the whole atmosphere was one of gracious relaxation.

"She does herself proud," Olsen murmured. "Were either of her men friends ever in the interior decoration business, do you suppose?"

"Not that I know of," Flash said. "I imagine the only interiors they ever decorated were their own."

Olsen had moved across the room and was inspecting a very modern painting in a plain wooden frame that hung on the wall over the fireplace.

"Cheap stuff," he observed. "Easy enough to do, if you've

got the knack. If our hostess collects old masters she doesn't do it to satisfy her own æsthetic taste."

He turned as the door opened and Mrs Schutte came in. She struck an immediate note of incongruity, in a long, voluminous house coat, vermilion in colour, and embroidered with gold braid, a pair of sky-blue, high-heeled evening shoes, and a red and yellow silk scarf wound turban fashion around her head. Flash noted with interest that her feet were small. With a thin-lipped, unwelcoming smile she advanced to meet them.

"Good evening, gentlemen. My maid told me you were here, and I must say it's a surprise. Anything I can do for you? Well, I suppose you wouldn't have come if you didn't think so. Sit down and tell me all about it."

"Thank you," Flash said, and they sat down, one on either side of the fireplace. She went across to a small side-table, selected a cigarette from the ebony box standing there, and as an afterthought offered it to them. They accepted, and Flash said, operating his lighter, "We've a few questions we'd like to ask you, Mrs Schutte, about the late Dominico Vasquez. You'll have read about it in the papers, I expect. We understand he was a friend of yours?"

She had seated herself on the broad, cushioned divan, and in the soft lighting she might have passed as tolerably good-looking, had it not been for her heavy make-up and garish ensemble. Thoughtfully she exhaled smoke through her nostrils, and her harsh voice, when she spoke again, was moderated as if in respect for the dead.

"Yes, I read about that. Nasty, wasn't it? I tell you, it quite upset me. Haven't felt like myself to-day at all. Not that he was a particular friend of mine. But you don't like to think of anyone you've known being murdered in cold blood, do you?"

"You don't," Flash agreed. "You didn't know him very well, then?"

"Not to say well. We used to have dinner sometimes, and a drink now and then. You know the sort of thing. We were business friends, really. I've got a few investments, and he gave me tips. Not always good ones, but I'm not holding that against him now."

"Yet you knew him well enough, Mrs Schutte, to give him a cheque equivalent to half the purchase price when he bought the Art Treasures Emporium."

She was silent for a minute or so, drawing rapidly on her cigarette and glancing from him to Olsen beneath lowered lids, as if trying to assess how much they knew. Flash waited, well satisfied. He had expected some such reaction to the piece of information which they had gleaned that afternoon. She gave vent, at last, to a hoarse sound that might have been taken for laughter in less strained circumstances.

"So you know about that, do you? Well, there's no reason why you shouldn't. Yes, I gave him the money. He was hard up at the time; he'd been doing a little speculating that hadn't come out right. He was dead keen on that Emporium, God knows why. So I lent him the money. No harm in that, was there? But it's not the sort of thing you breeze around, lending a man money. People might get the wrong idea."

"Without security, Mrs Schutte? Or did you expect to draw some of the profits from the business?"

"No, I didn't count on that. Mind you, it was paying all right, or so he told me. Can't see myself what anyone wants that sort of stuff for, but some people would buy anything. No, he reckoned to pay me back as soon as he could, with some sort of interest, and that was good enough for me. I wasn't using the money. And he made a will so that if anything happened to him the business would come to me. That was fair, wasn't it?"

Flash admitted that it was. He already knew about the will whereby Mrs Schutte took over the Emporium and all its assets. The rest of Vasquez's estate, such as it was, went to his wife in Paris. The former might not be interested in art for art's sake but she certainly knew how to manage her affairs to the best advantage. As if divining his thoughts, she said, "I'm no fool, as I dare say you've gathered. I don't mind splashing out with a bit of money for the sake of a friend, and if Mr Vasquez had lived I'd have got it back in time—no doubt about that, though Lord knows when. But I couldn't be expected to take a chance on never getting it back if anything happened to him."

"You had an idea, then, that something might happen to him?"

"No. Why should I? He was fit as a fiddle as far as I knew and likely to live to a hundred. But plenty of people think that and die round about forty or fifty just the same. It wasn't so much my idea as his."

"In that case, perhaps he was aware that an attempt might be made on his life. Did he ever say anything to suggest it?"

She lit a fresh cigarette from the smoking remains of the last and held it loosely between darkly stained fingers. The furrow between her black brows had deepened.

"Not that I remember. But then he might not have told me. We weren't that much in each other's confidence."

Flash was silent for a moment, and Olsen said, "He may have been superstitious. The previous owner of the Emporium died in rather peculiar circumstances. But you knew him too, didn't you, Mrs Schutte? I'm referring to Alfred Tilbury."

Abruptly she rose and walked across to the fireplace, and stood with her back turned, one hand held out to the warmth. Olsen smiled. The heat of the room in any part was suffocating. She said over her shoulder, "Yes, I knew him. We were old friends. But it wasn't much of a shock to me when he died. He was a very sick man."

"The owners of the Emporium certainly seem to be unfortunate," Flash said. "Were they acquainted, by any chance?"

"I don't think so. I met Mr Vasquez through a mutual friend. We all have a sentimental streak, I suppose, and when he wanted to buy the business—well, Mr Tilbury had been very keen on it, and that was one of the reasons why I put up some of the capital."

"But you are not personally interested in art?"

She turned then, and she was smiling. She had completely regained her poise.

"I'm interested in anything that makes money, Inspector," she said, with a frankness that could have been disarming to anyone lacking in perspicacity. Flash asked, with apparent irrelevance, "And do you know Mrs Tilbury?"

"I never met the lady." There was an undercurrent of malice in her voice that did not escape the two men. "Mr Vasquez negotiated the whole deal himself. After all, it was his business, and sorrowing widows aren't exactly up my street. I'm a widow myself, but I don't let it worry me. But aren't we getting away from the point? You came here to ask me about Mr Vasquez, and I'm doing my best to help you. Talking over my personal affairs isn't going to do much good one way or the other."

It was her method of telling them to keep off Tilbury. It pleased Flash to know that she had at least one vulnerable point, even though she was not going to give anything away if she could avoid it. He gathered all his forces for the next attack. But for the moment it was unnecessary. She went on, with complete confidence, "I know what you're going to ask me now. How I spent yesterday evening. Well, I'll tell you, and that'll save you the trouble. I was with Mr Vasquez, or, at least, I was with him part of the time. He called for me towards nine, and we went out and had dinner. Then he took himself off somewhere, and I came home."

"Didn't it occur to you," Flash said gently, "that this information might be of value to the police?"

"Oh, have a heart, Inspector. I've not been up so very long. This business has upset me, as I told you, and I was up late last night, or rather, early this morning. I didn't even see the paper until lunch-time. You couldn't expect me to come rushing round right away, could you? After all, it's your job to work out these things, not mine. And I really don't see that anything I say can be very important."

"You were one of the last people to see him alive, Mrs Schutte."

"Well, some one had to see him. What difference does it make if it was me? A good many people must have seen him after he left me, I should think."

"You knew where he was going, then?"

She hesitated for a few seconds, and then the answer came too readily.

"I hadn't the vaguest idea. I'm not one of those women

who follow a man round asking him questions. If a man tells me he's got an appointment, well, he has, and that's all there is to it."

"So he had a definite appointment. Do you know with whom?"

"I tell you I know nothing about it. He said he had to meet some one, and I said all right, I'd just as soon go home. I was tired, and I needed some sleep. . . ."

"And yet you did not immediately go to bed on reaching home. In fact, you stayed up until the early hours of the morning?"

She looked annoyed.

"I can't always sleep just because I'm tired," she said. "Some people can roll up and go off at once, but not me. I have to work up to it by easy stages."

"Particularly if you've anything on your mind," Flash suggested helpfully. "Was that the case last night?"

"Did I say that? No, I hadn't anything on my mind. I just wasn't tired. I mean, I was tired but I couldn't sleep. So I sat about and read for a bit and then I turned in."

She went back to her seat on the divan and lit another cigarette. Her forehead had a moist look about it. Evidently she was beginning to feel the heat of the room. Or perhaps, as she had implied, her nerves were not all they might be.

"And your maid, Mrs Schutte? Was she here last night?"

"No, she sleeps out. She lives with her mother or somebody, in Soho. You can talk to her if you like."

"Not just now, thanks. Mr Vasquez used to visit Connolly's Club from time to time—I expect you know it, it's in Soho Square. Did he mention he might be going there last night?"

"Connolly's? Oh, yes, I've been there. I went with him once, as a matter of fact. Starchy sort of place. He offered to get me made a member, but I said no, thanks very much. When I go out I like to enjoy myself."

"And did he intend going there last night?" Flash persisted.

"He didn't say so. But then he never did say much about his affairs. Not to me, at any rate."

That sounded like an exact description of Tilbury. It

seemed that whoever took over the Art Treasures Emporium immediately became a model of reticence. And well they might, Flash thought.

"Do you know of anyone who *was* in his confidence? Anyone who could have desired his death?"

"Not that I can think of. He wasn't a man to make enemies, I should say." She stared at them for a moment, as if endeavouring to make up her mind about something, then rushed on, "Don't think I'm trying to teach you your job, but it seems to me that if some one breaks into a flat and knocks the owner on the head it's a clear case of robbery with violence, or whatever you call it."

"Why robbery?"

"Well, he hadn't any money on him, had he?"

"That's true," Flash said, and looked at Olsen, as though the idea had only then occurred to him. "He should have had some money, shouldn't he? How much, do you suppose, Mrs Schutte?"

"I couldn't say. But he usually carried a fair sum."

"But he didn't mention it when you saw him earlier? There was no kind of monetary transaction between you?"

A sudden sparkle of anger lit her dark eyes. Apparently thought of the lost money genuinely annoyed her.

"No, there wasn't. I didn't expect to get my money back in penny numbers."

"I see. Now, assuming your theory of robbery is right, it's reasonable to think that the man who broke into the apartment——"

"It could have been a woman," she cut in. "Mr Vasquez was rather partial to blondes." There was no jealousy in her tone, only a profound contempt for masculine weakness.

"He was? I had heard something of the sort. Now, I wonder if you could help us there?"

She said quickly, "I can't give you names or addresses, if that's what you mean. But any one of them might have been interested in a little hard cash."

"And you think he had an appointment of that nature when he left you?"

"How do I know? I'm just going on the idea that if a man

has an engagement between ten and eleven it's not usually his broker he's meeting."

"Quite." Flash carefully flicked cigarette ash from his coat and tried to look like a model of solid stupidity. "By the way, when did *you* last visit this apartment in Andover Street, Mrs Schutte?"

"Me?" Momentarily she was taken aback, but recovering, she continued, "I never said I'd been there, did I?"

"Sorry. My mistake. But the caretaker——"

"Oh, *her*." Evidently she had decided that if it was coming to a showdown between the caretaker and herself she had better clear the ground in advance. "Well, I have been there a few times. I was there one evening this week, as a matter of fact. We went round and had a couple of drinks. We had a few things to discuss. . . ."

"Alone?" Flash put in.

She laughed. "I'm beyond the age for a chaperon," she said. "And as I said before, Mr Vasquez had an eye for blondes."

She was very insistent upon that idea, Flash thought. And because of that insistence he was inclined to view it with suspicion. A blind, if ever he saw one. Indeed, whoever had done the job, he was prepared to take a bet that it wasn't one of the victim's young women friends. He rose then, and Olsen followed suit. He said, "We're very much obliged for your information, Mrs Schutte. I expect we'll turn up something as we go along. I dare say you're as keen to see justice done as we are, even though he wasn't a special friend of yours."

He was watching her narrowly as he adjusted his coat. Perhaps it was the aftermath of strain, the sudden relief from the burden of being questioned. Or perhaps it was just good acting. But her whole face had undergone a change. She looked ill and haggard and her eyes glittered with something that might have been fear or anger or a mixture of both.

"I'll tell you one thing, Inspector," she said, with scarcely suppressed venom. "Whoever killed Mr Vasquez, I'd like to see them hanged three times."

He grinned. "Once would be enough," he said. "Hangmen are some of the most efficient people in the world. Good thing."

They left her, and the Chinese girl saw them to the front door. Neither spoke until they were out in the street again. It was a dark night and cold, and the north-easterly wind had cleared the way of loitering pedestrians. The sort of night, in fact, when only policemen linger, cursing their jobs. Flash said, "Well, what do you think of her?"

"I'm trying not to." Olsen had paused to light a cigarette, despite the wind's chilly playfulness. "But if she didn't do it she certainly knows who did."

"I think you're right," Flash agreed. "What's more, her nerves are terrible and she may crack any minute, which would be a good thing for all concerned. She's got a nice motive for murder, too, the business coming to her like that."

Olsen glanced back over his shoulder and laughed gently.

"We've given her something to think about, anyway. Now she's in sole charge I expect she's planning to cut out and take a suite at the Ritz. Though that flat of hers isn't bad at all. Not the sort of place you'd expect to find over the Whitewash Laundry."

"You've got it wrong," Flash said. "It's Washwhite." He walked on for several paces in silence, his hands in his pockets, then, coming to an abrupt standstill, he exclaimed, "Or have you got it wrong? It's an idea. Why didn't we think of it before?"

"Why didn't we think of what?" Olsen too had paused, and was peering at him inquiringly.

"The laundry. What's to stop them having the stuff delivered in a basket to the laundry and shipping it off somewhere else immediately?"

"Nothing," Olsen said, with a certain bitterness. "As you say, why didn't we think of it before? She probably owns the whole outfit, and that's where she comes in. It's also where she goes out if you're right."

Flash glanced at the illuminated dial of his watch.

"It's only a theory," he said, "but it's worth trying. Look, Fred, you nip round and find out, if you can, what laundry Bluff Bailey and Pete used at their old digs. I've got to get along to Connolly's and ask a few necessary questions about our old pal Vasquez. Pick me up there as soon as you're through."

Olsen nodded and raised his hand to a passing taxi. Flash added, as the vehicle drew up:

"And don't come back and tell me they did their own washing or I'll never forgive you."

CHAPTER XV

I CAN'T understand it," Michael said. Slowly he paced his office, hands behind his back, staring about him as if he expected suddenly to see a solution to his problems. Miss Page was his major concern at the moment. It was past nine o'clock and she had not yet arrived. Such negligence in anyone as punctilious as she was distressing, to say the least. And, coming on top of last night's adventures and the latest Press news regarding Vasquez's death, it was causing him much anxiety. Sling was not being very helpful, either. He was sitting on the edge of the desk, cigarette in hand, regarding Michael blankly. There was about him this evening an unaccustomed air of depression, which aggravated the Irishman's tender nerves. The latter went on, "Are you sure you can't get her on the phone? She may be ill, poor girl. She must be, or she would have rung up before this."

"I've tried twice," Sling said. "You saw me do it. And there was no reply."

"That be damned for a joke." Absently Michael reached for the brandy bottle and replenished their recently emptied glasses. "It's some sort of a hostel, isn't it? What would they be doing, not answering the phone?"

"Ignoring it, I should think."

Michael glowered at him.

"I don't know why I waste this good stuff pouring it down your throat. It doesn't make you any better-tempered."

"Maybe not. But I'd be worse without it."

Mike sat down suddenly at his desk.

"I'll get on to them myself," he said. "Give me her number."

Sling complied with apparent indifference, and he sat there for several minutes, dialling furiously.

"Blast this Museum exchange," he said at last, and then, into the receiver, "No, I wasn't talking to you, madam. What number are you? Thanks. I've been trying to get you for hours. I want to talk to Miss Christina Page." He paused, listening, and went on, "Well, where is she, then? Yes, I got that the first time, but she must be somewhere. *What?*" He jerked upright in his chair. "Gone without leaving an address, is that what you said? I don't believe it. I'm not calling you a liar, madam. But anyone can make a mistake. . . ." He banged down the receiver and brought out a handkerchief to mop his forehead. "What a female! Sounds as if she's made of barbed wire and reinforced concrete. She says Miss Page left some time ago, and she doesn't know her address. Can you credit that?"

"Why not?" Sling said.

"Don't just sit there talking daft, boy. *Do* something. She must have left her address with some one. Didn't she say anything to you about it?"

"Not a thing. But then I'm not in her confidence."

"Well, who is? I'll ask Lilian. She's bound to know."

"On the contrary, it was she who gave me that Museum number."

"You're all mad," Michael said, leaping to his feet. "Everybody's mad. I'm supposed to be running a club, but do I ever get any co-operation? Do I ever have a full staff to help me, I'm asking you? No. Nine times out of ten I'm running in all directions doing everything myself. And now Miss Page. You'd have thought you could rely on her, wouldn't you? Well, if you didn't, I did. A nice, quiet, steady sort of girl. And what happens? Off she goes and she doesn't come back and we don't know where she is and she doesn't telephone. If anyone's ill I'm the first man to tell 'em to stay away, but I like to *know*. Not knowing, what am I to think? She might be dead——" He stopped, aghast at the horror of his own suggestion.

Sling raised an eyebrow.

"Aren't you taking it a bit too seriously, Mike? She'll probably turn up any minute."

"And if she doesn't?"

"What the hell? We managed all right before she came, didn't we? In a way I think we might be better off if she doesn't turn up again. This Vasquez business isn't by any means settled. The police may come nosing around, and you've no guarantee that Miss Page won't let something out if she's here."

"Why should she? A nice sensible girl, honest as the day——"

"If she's as honest as all that," Sling said, "she may have taken exception to our little pranks last night."

Michael was silent, finishing his brandy. He said then, "You're really expecting trouble, aren't you? With the police, I mean."

"I am. And I've never come unstuck yet."

"Perhaps you're right. We'll see what happens, anyway." He glanced up as the door opened and his wife entered. "Oh, hallo, dear. Everything going nicely?"

"Why, of course, Michael. What else?" Relations between them had been distinctly strained since the previous night. Several times he had made an effort to bridge the gulf, but always she had retired behind an atmosphere formidable and frosty. "I just came to see if you had contacted Miss Page yet? I'm really quite worried about her."

"Well, no, not exactly," Michael said.

"Whatever can you mean by that? Surely one either telephones a person or one doesn't?"

"In this case one doesn't," Sling said. "The old girl at the hostel tells us that Miss Page has gone, never to return."

She bestowed upon him a look of cold inquiry, as if she had only then become aware of his presence. Her famous smile was sadly lacking this evening—in the absence of guests, at least.

"Really? But surely you have her new address?"

"I'm afraid not, dear," Michael put in hastily, fearful that Sling might say something to annoy her. "I was just saying it's not like Miss Page—or at least, not like what we expected of her."

"I see no reason to make so much fuss," she said, quick to defend her favourite. "There is probably some very simple explanation. In fact, I think it's an obvious oversight, and one that anyone might make. I believe she did mention something about moving, but I didn't pay much attention at the time. I expect the dear girl will ring up or come along presently. Personally, I think she has been doing far too much. But then, as I said to her last night, *some one* has to do something, or the whole place would go to pieces."

She glared at Sling and withdrew, and he glanced across at Michael and laughed, for the first time that evening.

"She's properly got it in for us, hasn't she? Me especially. She thinks I encourage you along the downward path."

"Lilian's all right," Michael said. "She's just a bit touchy, and who wouldn't be? All this talk of murder and Vasquez being here last night has upset her. First thing she asked me when she'd read the papers was what time he left. Of course I said I didn't know, which was true, and I'll go on saying so to anyone who asks me."

As if in direct challenge of his statement the front door-bell rang. Sling heaved himself out of his chair.

"I'll go and see who that is," he said. "Siegman's full of moans and misery this evening, and when he feels like that the sight of his face is enough to send anyone elsewhere."

He went out, and Michael sighed and poured himself another drink, feeling that he needed it. The events of the night before, coupled with his immoderate drinking bout, had left his nerves badly shaken. And in his view there was only one remedy. The door opened again and Sling, entering, said softly, "It's friend Flash. And he looks as if he means business."

Michael groaned. "Send him in, but for God's sake don't leave me. I'm not feeling strong enough to tackle him alone."

He quickly gulped his drink, straightened his tie, and sat back, trying to look like a man without anything on his conscience. The result was not very successful, but fortunately for his peace of mind he was unaware of this. Flash came in and Sling followed, shutting the door behind them. The detective made no protest. He said, "Good evening, Mike.

Nice to see some one looking so fit. Grand day it's been, hasn't it?"

"For a funeral," Michael said gloomily, then, realizing the remark was somewhat ill-timed, he went on, "Come on in and make yourself comfortable, Frank. Every one else does. What'll you have? A drop of brandy?"

"No, thanks." Flash seated himself on the other side of the desk. "I'm on duty to-night and have got to keep my head clear."

"That's tough. What is it, anything special?"

Flash looked across at Sling, who was wandering vaguely about the room as if in search of something.

"A little thing called murder," he said. "And talking of murder, Mike, you have a member by the name of Dominico Vasquez. Or you had. He was found this morning with his head cracked open in an empty apartment in Andover Street. You may have read about it."

Michael sighed very audibly.

"Won't your policeman's brain let you think of anything else?" he said. "He was a member all right. I'm not disputing that; I'm just a hard-worked man trying to forget. It's a nasty business, but if one of my members goes out and gets himself murdered, I can't be held responsible, can I?"

"I'm not trying to hold anyone responsible. Not yet. But in order to go out he had first to come in. And he did come in, didn't he? What time was that?"

"How did you know he came here?" Michael asked, with sudden suspicion.

"That's my business. Now, Mike, you're not going to start hedging, are you? Because it won't do any good. We've traced him as far as here, and I've already looked in your visitors' book, so that's that. At the moment all I want to know is, what time did he come and what time did he go?"

Michael swivelled in his chair and said, with a fair assumption of dignity, "Mr Fitzroberts, you heard what Mr Flash asked. Perhaps you can help him?"

Sling looked up in the act of lighting a cigarette and met the detective's hard stare without any particular emotion.

"Perhaps I can. Mr Vasquez, you say? That was the little man from Mexico, wasn't it? Now, let me think. . . ." He paused, and appeared to be thinking deeply. "No, Inspector, I'm afraid I can't. I did see him wandering about during the evening, on the right side of midnight it must have been, because Mrs Connolly's friends were still running riot. But I didn't let him in and I certainly didn't see him go."

"Did anyone see him go? The man on the door, for instance, or whoever admitted him?"

"They may have done. Yes, I suppose they would. But there was only Ramon on last night. Siegman was off duty."

"I'll see them both," Flash said, and as Sling made a movement towards the door, "Don't go, Mr Fitzroberts. There are one or two other things I have in mind. You can ring through for them, can't you, Mike?"

Wearily Michael lifted the telephone receiver and signalled the switchboard. He said, "That you, Siegman? Come in, will you? Ramon can take over for a while. And tell him to stand by. I'll be wanting to see him too."

He hung up. Flash was saying, "You're not looking too bright this evening, Mr Fitzroberts. What time did you get to bed last night?"

"I didn't. The fact is, Inspector, we had a spot of celebration last night. It was Mrs Connolly's birthday, and you can imagine what that means. So I stayed on after we closed to catch up on the work."

"Oh . . . very commendable of you, I'm sure. You locked up after you left, I suppose. What time was that, by the way?"

"About seven, I should think. I had breakfast at a café, and then went home. Yes, I locked the side-door when I left. Michael had done the rest."

"The side-door, of course." Flash looked thoughtful. "Would it have been possible for Vasquez to have gone out that way without anyone seeing him?"

"Well. . . ." He sounded dubious. "I suppose he could. There were a lot of people coming and going all the time. Mrs Connolly's friends, and so on. And naturally you can't have your eyes everywhere at once. But it would be a bit unorthodox, wouldn't it?"

"Mr Vasquez may have been an unorthodox person," Flash said dryly. Sling looked shocked.

"If I'd thought he'd be sneaking out of side-doors," he said, "he wouldn't have got in." And Michael nodded in profound agreement.

There came a knock at the door, and Siegman entered. He glanced from one to the other of the trio gathered there, and then his interest came to focus upon Michael. He said, "You wanted me, Mr Connolly?"

"If I hadn't," the latter said irritably, "I shouldn't have sent for you. Mr Flash here wants to ask you a few questions."

The look that Siegman gave him was one of sheer indignation, before he turned his attention to the detective. Flash said, with a certain affability, "I shan't keep you a minute. I expect you're busy. I understand you weren't on duty here last night?"

"That's right, sir. It was my evening off."

The detective's tone had considerably mollified his ruffled feelings. Sling looked amused. Flash went on, "D'you mind telling me where you were?"

"Not a bit. Though I don't see that it's anyone's business but my own. I was at home."

"The whole evening?"

"Yes, sir. I was going out, but thought better of it. I'd got too much to do. I don't get such a lot of spare time."

"Is there anyone who could vouch for that if necessary?"

"How do you mean, sir? Oh, I see. Back me up. Well, strictly speaking, no. My good lady is away just now, and I'm on my own." He looked anxiously round as if seeking confirmation of his words, and added, somewhat inconsequently, "I was distempering the kitchen."

"Have you ever had much to do with a Mr Vasquez? He's been here quite a few times. You know the man I mean?"

Siegman sniffed. He appeared to consider the incident as a slur upon his personal reputation.

"Oh, I know him, sir. It was all in the papers. A foreign gentleman. I remember him quite well. He was pretty free with his money."

"Was he usually alone or in company?"

"Alone, most times I saw him. But once he came here with a Mrs Schutte."

"I see. That'll be all for now, thanks."

Siegmán accepted his dismissal, and was followed shortly after by Ramon, who had little to add to his colleague's testimony. He had been on duty the previous evening and recalled admitting the Señor. It must have been at about a quarter past eleven, or a little later. They had passed a few pleasant words in their native tongue. The Señor was always very polite. But as to his subsequent departure Ramon knew nothing. He had been very busy with Mrs Connolly's friends. The Señor had not left his coat in the cloakroom, so he might easily have left without anyone noticing him. He could have gone by the side-door, certainly, had he wished. But why should he have so wished? The young Spaniard seemed to regard such eccentricity as being beyond human understanding. He said nothing about the failure of the lights. Sling had already ensured his silence on that point, and Ramon, who was quick to learn, had earned the equivalent of a week's salary by his reticence.

With due appreciation of what constituted a waste of time, Flash let him go, but at the door the boy stood aside respectfully to make way for Mrs Connolly, who was just about to enter. She paused on the threshold, started dramatically at sight of the detective, and drifted across to him with outstretched hand. The frozen expression she had hitherto worn had melted into a smile of seraphic pleasure.

"Mr Flash, I'm *delighted* to see you. With all this dreadful business I've been feeling completely *lost* all day. We've been in a positive quandary as to whether we should phone you, but I said to Michael that you'd be terribly busy. And now here you are. Such a comfort to see some one so calm, so composed about the whole thing. But haven't they given you anything to drink? Oh, how bad of them."

Flash, shaking hands mechanically, said, "That's all right, Mrs Connolly. I just dropped round to make a few inquiries, and Mike's been doing his best to help me. I shan't be here long. Perhaps you could give me a few particulars, if you don't mind? You knew this Mr Vasquez fairly well, I believe."

"Oh, my dear, of course. I was having a drink with him only the other evening. Now, when was it? Why, the evening you were here too. Remember? We all sat up at the bar. I haven't seen him since though, I don't think. Yesterday was my birthday. Did Michael tell you that? We were having a little party in celebration, and naturally I was *entirely* taken up with my friends. Mr Fitzroberts did mention something about him being here, but I didn't know him well enough to invite him to join us."

There followed an uneasy silence. Michael was staring at her in wonder. From resembling a statue carved in stone which surveyed everything he did with condemnation she had changed into the radiant hostess, a little disturbed because her organization had temporarily gone astray, but radiant nevertheless. Flash said, "I quite understand, Mrs Connolly. You would have been busy most of the evening, I suppose. Your door-boy says that Mr Vasquez arrived at about a quarter past eleven. He *thinks*. Now I wonder if I'm right in assuming he didn't enter the dining-room?"

"You are," Sling put in. "We were absolutely packed out last night, and there wasn't room for anyone who hadn't booked a table. But I did see him hanging round the bar when I went past."

"What time was that?"

"About half-past eleven, I should think. I don't really know."

"And you can't tell me how long he stayed there?"

"Not exactly. He was wandering about the corridors some of the time. I was pretty busy myself, so didn't take much notice. The barman might be able to tell you."

"Right. I'll check up on that. Where's Miss Page?"

The question, coming without warning, caught them momentarily off guard. Sling was the first to recover. He said, "She's taken the evening off. Things were pretty strenuous here last night. But I don't think she'd be able to help you much. She was in her office most of the time."

"I'd like to see her, just the same," Flash said. "Is she on the telephone?"

Sling shrugged his shoulders and Mike sat limply in his

chair, trying to look as if he were somewhere else. Mrs Connolly gracefully took over.

"It's positively *uncanny* you should ask that, Mr Flash. Because we were discussing it earlier. She used to live at some kind of hostel, but now she has moved, and no one seems to know her address. But I'll see if I can find it for you. It's probably in her office somewhere. She's such a methodical girl."

She went out, and Flash said, "That's a bit unusual, isn't it? To change her address without telling anyone?"

Sling shrugged again and lit a cigarette. He said, "Some people would change their sex without telling anyone. Have you finished with me, Inspector? Because if so, I'll shift. I'm not in the mood for miking to-night."

Flash nodded. "You can go," he said. "I'll see you again later if I think of anything else. Meanwhile, I'd like to have a private talk with Mr Connolly."

He rose and opened the door, waiting while Sling went out, and made sure that no one lingered outside before he closed it again. He might have saved himself the trouble, for Sling had other methods of finding out what he wanted to know.

"That young man brings out the worst in me," Flash said, returning to his chair. "One of these days. . . ." He brought out a cigarette, lighted it, and drew on it for some time in silence. Tackling Michael was not a project which inspired him with much enthusiasm just then. It was, he felt, rather like trying to talk sense to a child, and an obstinate child at that. But it had to be done, and the direct method was obviously the best. He asked abruptly, "What laundry do you use, Mike?"

The latter, who had been trying without much success to keep abreast of everything, could only stare in genuine amazement. His mind, misty with too much brandy and not enough sleep, was still dwelling on the perplexity of Sling's flagrant desertion. He repeated, "Laundry? Was that what you said?"

"That's right. Every club sends stuff to a laundry, doesn't it? Tablecloths and so on. Which one do you use?"

"The Soho, just across the road. We send our own things

there too. At least, Lilian does. She always sees to that kind of thing herself. I think Miss Page gives her a hand sometimes. But what in hell are you getting at, Frank?"

"Do you always use the same one? You've never tried out a concern called Washwhite?"

Thinking he saw a shaft of daylight, Michael said, "Now look, Frank, I don't know just what your idea is, but if you think you can sell me a new laundry you're backing the wrong horse. You may have shares in it for all I care, but we've been using the Soho ever since we've been here, and we're going on using it. . . ."

"All right," Flash said equably. "It was just an idea. Forget about it." He rose, stretched himself, and began to walk about the room. He said, after a few minutes, "I'm going to tell you a thing or two, Mike. Perhaps I'm overstepping the bounds of discretion, but I've got to get some help from somebody, so we won't go into that. You're not the most intelligent man I've ever met, but I can trust you, and that's something. I know you can be close as an oyster if you like, too damn' close for comfort sometimes. But we'll let that go, too. Now about this man Vasquez. You read the papers, and you'll have seen something about these art robberies that have been taking place in London. Well, I've reason to believe that Vasquez was one of the boys who pulled the strings."

"Boloney," Michael said. "He was having a drink with Lilian the other evening. You heard her say so."

Flash sighed, but resumed his train of thought with admirable patience.

"I know that. But because a man is crooked it doesn't stop him mixing with the ordinary population. And much as I respect your wife, I'm not going to rule out from suspicion anyone who happens to have a drink with her. Men like Vasquez rely on dressing well and living well and flashing money about to help them get away with it. All right, then. Having gone so far I'll go a step farther and tell you I think Tilbury was in it too. And whoever knocked him on the head did the same to Vasquez."

Michael was getting very red in the face. He burst out, "It's a conspiracy. That's what it is. A God-damned

conspiracy. Some one's trying to ruin me. They want to smash up my club and make me the fall-guy. But I won't stand for it, Frank. . . ."

"Hold your collar on," the latter said. "And try to forget your club for a minute. Just because a couple of members are dead it doesn't necessarily implicate you, as you said yourself earlier. And whatever turns up in this case, I'll try to keep Connolly's out of it. That much I promise you. Now I'm not going to bore you with all the details because it would take too long, and why should you care, anyway? But one thing I'm certain of. When Tilbury died Vasquez took over his organization, and they were responsible for that Park Lane job that's been giving me so much trouble. And I've a theory that whoever pinched those two pictures shipped 'em to a laundry calling itself Washwhite, and they promptly sent them somewhere else. But where? That's what I've got to find out. I thought it might be here. . . ."

"Here?" Michael bellowed. "You're mad, Frank. Stark, staring mad. What would I be doing with stolen property?"

"I didn't say that," Flash assured him. "But you've got a very mixed staff. All right, I'll admit I was wrong. But I still believe that fundamentally I'm right, and I thought you might be able to help me. You've lived here a long time, and as you're close to the Carnival, where a lot of these birds meet, you might know of some one who does use this so-called laundry."

"I don't," Michael said. "I can't help being near the Carnival, can I? Dirty, stinking little hole that it is. I was here first. And I tell you, Frank, it's always been a thorn in my side. Can't think why the police don't close it down and be done with it."

"We would, but it's sometimes useful. And you can't tell me anything more about Vasquez, either? I can't help feeling you're not putting all your cards on the table, Mike. I know you wouldn't willingly serve me a bad turn, but this club of yours has got to be a mania with you, and I believe you'd see a lot of people hanged before you'd spill anything that might touch your precious reputation."

"I don't *know* anything," Michael said unhappily, but with

dogged persistence. "I'd help you, Frank, if I could. You ought to know that. But I'm a busy man. You can't expect me to keep an eye on my neighbours and an ear to the ground ferreting out things for the police. If you want to know anything about this district, ask Sling. He knows everything. . . ."

"And tells nothing," Flash said. "I know his sort."

The telephone rang. Mechanically Michael lifted the receiver and listened. He said, "Half a minute," and, passing it across the desk, added, "It's for you."

The detective took it, said, "Flash speaking," and heard Olsen's voice across the wire.

"Hallo, Frank. Fred here. I've got that information you want, and you're right. Absolutely. In both cases. I also stopped off at the Yard and ran into Waygood, and he'd got a message for you. From the lady we saw a bit earlier. She wants you to go over as soon as you can. She's got something important to tell you. Looks as if she's cracking up, all right. Waygood says she was pretty agitated."

"Right," Flash said, inwardly elated but outwardly his usual blank self. "I've got one or two things to do here, so I'll meet you there in half an hour, or just over. And Fred . . . there's a young lady I want to see, name of Miss Page—she works here at Connolly's. You've seen her. Height about five foot two, brownish hair, blue eyes, age roughly twenty-three or four, last address, three Feltham Place, W.C.2. She moved recently and nobody knows where she is. Get Waygood to find her if he can and report to me. Got all that? Right. See you later."

He hung up, and Michael regarded him wrathfully.

"You're being a bit high-handed, aren't you?" he said. "What's that little girl got to do with it? A thoroughly nice kid, if ever I saw one. She'll show up presently, or telephone. She's bound to."

Flash made an admonishing gesture.

"She may be all you say, Mike, but I want to talk to her, and I haven't much time and can't afford to take any chances. It won't do her any harm, will it, talking to the police? By the way, did you ever take up her references?"

"That's got nothing to do with it. If I like a person I don't bother to find out what other people think. And I tell you I don't like it."

"Whether you like it or not," Flash said, consulting his watch, "I've got to be moving. I'll take a quick look round the premises and see the rest of your staff. I'm sorry, Mike, but duty is duty. I've got a case to finish, and I'm going to clear it up, Connolly's or no Connolly's. Be sensible, man. You wouldn't like this affair to pass out of my hands, would you? Believe me, you'd get some publicity then, with coppers streaming in and out. At least you know you can rely on me not to kick up much of a dust."

He paused as from the room next door came the sound of a thin scream, quickly stifled. With surprising speed Michael rose, and together they rushed out and flung open the door of Miss Page's office. The light was on, and leaning against the desk, her hands gripping the edge, was Mrs Connolly. She looked up as they entered, and Michael, who had rarely seen her anything but cool and self-possessed, was shocked at sight of her agitation. Flash said, "What is it, Mrs Connolly?"

"Oh. . . ." She leant on the desk, staring from one to the other, and gradually her face recovered something of its usual vivacity. "Nothing . . . nothing at all. I just came over faint."

"Are you often taken like that?"

"Of course not," Michael said brusquely, and went across and put his arms about her. She looked up at him, and all her recent animosity was gone. "What is it, me darlin' girl?" he asked, in a whisper more carrying than his normal speaking voice. "Ye're tremblin'."

Flash stepped over to them. His tone was authoritative.

"This is Miss Page's office, I take it? Have you been here ever since you left us, Mrs Connolly?"

"Positively *no*. I did intend to come and look for Miss Page's address but I saw Siegman going along the corridor and I went after him because they were fairly friendly, in a business sense, of course, and so I thought it just possible that she had told him where she was moving. But he didn't know anything either. And then Lady Jane Camden-Witheringham

had just arrived with her fiancé, and I had to stay and talk to them. And then Tom, the barman, you know, came out and said we were running low on orange bitters, so I looked round for Mr Fitzroberts, but I couldn't find him. And then I remembered you'd be waiting for Miss Page's address, so I came along here, and suddenly my heart seemed to contract. *Absurdly* silly, isn't it?"

"You must be after taking things more easily," Michael said, and to Flash, "Don't be asking her any of your damn' silly questions, man. It's a drop of brandy she's needing."

Flash, remembering the time factor and deciding that he'd do better elsewhere, turned away without a word, to find Siegman and Ramon craning their necks around the half-open door.

He pushed past them and went off down the corridor, and they returned, talking in undertones, to their respective posts of duty. A lady and gentleman were in the act of leaving.

Left alone, Michael was about to shepherd his wife tenderly away, but she clutched his arm. She said with some urgency, "Michael! I didn't tell that man the truth. He's on duty, isn't he? He's just *looking* for trouble."

"How do you mean, dear?"

"Oh, don't try to cover things up, darling. He's come here about that wretched man Vasquez, hasn't he? And he'd give anything to find something in this club. I know he's your friend, but a policeman is always a policeman, and I'm not going to do anything to bring dozens of them down upon our heads, spoiling everything and turning every one away. It was true I only just came into this room. It was in darkness when I opened the door, naturally, but there's a street lamp just across the way that lights up the window, and outside I *distinctly* saw a shadow. I don't know who it was, but it looked terribly sinister. It was only there for a moment, and then it moved away. It made me feel quite *ill*, especially after all this horrible business."

"A shadow," Michael repeated. He was beginning to feel that with his wife prone to nerves the whole universe was tumbling about him. "What sort of shadow, dear?"

"Oh, I don't know. It was an enormous thing, it might

have been anything or anyone. But now that tedious policeman has gone we can look."

She moved across to the window, and Michael followed, none too willingly. The window, of the old-fashioned kind, slid up without much difficulty. Outside the night was cold and empty and uninteresting. The light from a street lamp did, in fact, illuminate the area only a few feet below, but it revealed nothing that moved or even faintly resembled the owner of a shadow. Michael, perplexed, drew in his head again, and his wife said, "Look, dear. There are marks on the window-sill."

The ledge she indicated held the dust of years, but in places it had been disturbed, perhaps by the movements of a human body. Michael said, "I dare say they were made by the window-cleaner, dear. They often climb in and out of windows. I've seen them doing it. What you need is a drop of brandy." And then, as he closed the window and they turned away, "Where's Sling?"

"I don't know. He's probably wandering about somewhere. But did you ever know him to be anywhere when he's needed?"

"Sometimes," he said, remembering certain events of the night before. "I'm glad you didn't say anything to Flash. He'd make a mountain out of it, and we'd never get rid of him. He's a nosy devil."

"Michael!" She gripped him by the arm again. "What is going on here? You haven't been yourself for the last twenty-four hours, and now I'm beginning to feel *most* peculiar towards everybody. There must be something."

"I don't know——" Michael was beginning, when there came a knock on the door and Siegman burst into the room. He was a very different man to the one they were accustomed to seeing about the club premises. His colourless eyes were alight with anger and his sallow face had turned a dull brick-red. Michael, whose thoughts were never far away from the subject, instantly suspected him of drinking.

"Mr Connolly." He laid much stress upon the prefix. "I want to ask you a question, man to man. How much longer are we going to be pestered with these here policemen? I'm

sick and tired of it, I don't mind telling you. And every one else the same."

For a moment Michael was speechless. With the exception of the chef, whose temperament was permissible, no one had ever talked to him like that. No one, that is, among the general staff. Indeed, in the whole history of the club he could not remember one single instance of such insubordination. By nature he was a friendly man, and treated his staff with a kind of bluff camaraderie when he was in a normal mood. But in return he expected, and received, due respect. At the moment he was not in a normal mood, and his blood-pressure rose accordingly. He began to shout.

"What in hell d'ye mean by busting in like that? I won't have it, d'ye hear me? Trying to tell me how to run my own business. The police have the right to ask what questions they like if I say so."

Siegmán, to whom the enormity of his own conduct was apparently just occurring, visibly wilted. But he made a valiant effort to hold his ground.

"That's all very well, Mr Connolly. But this is the second time they've been round here, and I don't hold in with it. When I came here this was a respectable club, and no one could say otherwise. But if the police——"

"Devil rot the lot of you!" Michael broke in. "What are you getting so rattled about? It's not your club. What d'you ever do towards it? I'm the only one who's always here, wet or shine, trouble or no trouble. Me and my wife." He gave her shoulder a squeeze that caused her to wince with pain. "We're the only ones who've got a right to moan, if there's one due."

Siegmán said, not without dignity, "Of course, Mr Connolly, if you're not satisfied with my services I'm quite prepared to resign."

"Resign me foot! Get out of here, you half-baked son of a numskull. Get out of my sight, and go stick your head down a mouse-hole."

Siegmán drew himself up to meet the solemnity of the occasion. He said quietly, "If that's how you feel, sir, you can take my notice as from now," and marched out of the

office in bitter triumph. At this stage he nearly fell headlong over Ramon, who had been enjoying himself with his ear to the door. For once Siegman failed to reprimand him. To a man in his state of mind any audience was better than none. He seized upon the unlucky youth, and while searching for his hat and coat poured forth excerpts from the scene, with some embellishment.

"So I said to him, 'If you don't like it, Mr Connolly, you know what you can do.' I'm sick and tired of it, I said, and I'm not the only one. And another thing, I said . . ."

His voice trailed on and on, and Ramon listened, for while he was thus engaged he could not be expected to be doing anything more useful.

Mrs Connolly, aghast at such a disruption of their routine, was remonstrating with her infuriated husband.

"You shouldn't have said that to him, dear. After all, he *has* been here a long time, and I expect he was upset."

"Upset be damned!" Michael said, without any sign of penitence. "We're all upset, aren't we? But we can't afford to have anyone telling us how to run our own show. He'll be back by to-morrow at the latest, I'll bet you. They always come back."

"I hope you're right, dear. Now I wonder if I should look for Miss Page's address, on top of all this bother? It might keep Mr Flash busy for a while."

"Don't be troubling your sweet head," he advised, and kissed her with more fondness than he had done for years. He was feeling suddenly sentimental, for some illogical reason. Perhaps it was because of the discovery that his wife was prone to feminine frailty like any other woman. "Frank has got one of his scouts out looking for her. And much good may it do him."

"Oh, darling, I shall be terribly glad when this is all settled," she said, and allowed him to escort her to the door. Everything was very quiet outside now. Evidently Siegman had gone, for Ramon had settled down to superintend the cloakroom with an air of conscious proprietorship. They went into Michael's office to discover Sling there, ensconced in a chair with his eyes closed and a glass of brandy beside

him on the desk. Now beyond either surprise or anger, Michael said, "What the devil d'you think *you're* doing? Have you been here all the time?"

Sling opened his eyes and surveyed them drowsily. He reached for his glass, and they saw that a white silk handkerchief swathed the palm of his right hand.

"Some of the time," he said. "I don't guarantee to be anywhere all of the time."

Michael drew up a chair for his wife and, going round to the other side of the desk, seated himself. He leant over and confiscated the newly opened bottle of brandy.

"A nice thing," he said. "I go out for five minutes and you come in and finish the old one and start another. What have you done to your hand?"

"The corkscrew slipped. I must be losing my touch. Have you shaken your pet copper yet?"

"He's around somewhere," Michael said. "Here, dear, have a little of this. It'll do you a power of good."

He handed a glass half full across to his wife, and she took it without comment. She was still rather pale. She sipped delicately, and a silence descended upon them. Sling had closed his eyes again. It seemed that loss of sleep was just beginning to tell upon him. Mrs Connolly, finishing her drink, lighted a cigarette and rose. She said, "I feel better now, Michael. I think I'll go and see what Mr Flash is doing. One can't just let him wander all over the place, can one?"

"One could," Sling murmured. "The way I feel now, anyone could bury me and wander all over my grave, and I'd never know."

Mrs Connolly directed at him a look that should have registered, even though his eyes were closed. She said, "Siegman just gave notice and walked out. But of course that means nothing to you."

"Did he? I'm amazed. I didn't know he had that much courage."

"You're impossible," she said. "Michael, dear, you really should do something about him," and went out, the full skirt of her evening dress swishing a dignified accompaniment.

Michael rested his aching head on one hand and stared at Sling morosely.

"You shouldn't worry her, boy. She's not feeling so good to-night." Somehow he could not bring himself to mention the shadow on the window. It was all too fantastic, and so unlike Lilian.

"Neither do I," Sling said. "I feel vile. Watching you snore last night didn't do me any good. And what have I done, anyway? I've only been sitting here having a quiet think."

"It's not what you've done but what Frank is doing that's got me worried. D'you know what? He sent out one of his boys to look for Miss Page. But what do you care? You were never struck on her, were you?"

Sling opened his eyes again and lit a cigarette, drawing on it as if it were his last hope of resuscitation.

"She's all right," he said. "I've a feeling she'd be quite human if anyone ever got to know her."

Michael eyed him with sudden suspicion.

"You haven't been trying, have you?"

"Me?" Sling appeared genuinely astonished. "Every time she looks at me I feel like the big bad wolf himself."

"So does every one else," Michael said, mollified. "That's why I took her on in the first place. It's good for business." He had forgotten that his wife had played a very large part in Miss Page's engagement.

At that moment Flash knocked and put his head round the door. He was looking mildly cheerful. He said, "I've done my little piece, and I'm just off."

"Good," Michael said, with more feeling than tact, and then added quickly, "I mean, I expect you've got a lot to do. Drop in and tell us the latest, Frank, when you're passing."

The detective nodded. "What time d'you close? Two o'clock, isn't it? I'll probably see you before then. Cheerio."

Michael stared at the closed door for a while, and then got slowly to his feet.

"I don't like the sound of that," he said. "Come on, Sling boy. We'd better go and put some life into this club while there's still time."

CHAPTER XVI

FLASH, going out to further and, he hoped, interesting discoveries, was not dissatisfied with his night's work so far. He was always suspicious of evidence, but assuming that the Spanish boy and the barman were telling the truth and had not been tipped off to say so, Vasquez had arrived at Connolly's the previous night somewhere about 11.15, had taken two drinks in the cocktail bar, and had left towards a quarter to twelve. Between these times he had forsaken the bar and returned. It seemed possible that he was looking for some one, and when that person failed to appear he went out by the side-door in order to throw off the scent the police whom he knew, or imagined, to be tailing him.

Alternatively, he may have had an appointment with some one outside the club, and merely used the latter as a subterfuge. If it was true that he left the club at or near 11.45 he could not have gone very far, since he was killed approximately at midnight, or not long after. It would have been possible for him to have got to Andover Street in the time, had he taken a taxi, and that would have fitted in nicely, had the murder been committed there. But Flash still preferred the theory of the body's having been planted after the murder had actually been committed, and thus his sphere of investigation was centred once more around Soho Square and its environment. Of course, Vasquez might have driven to some other destination, as yet unknown. But so far there had been no evidence forthcoming from any driver of a public vehicle to that effect.

Flash, riding in a taxi to the apartment of Mrs Magda Schutte, was inclined to let the whole issue wait. It seemed that this woman of mystery had decided to do some serious talking, in which case she might elucidate many details that were still very puzzling, and save him a whole lot of trouble. It was high time he had some luck in this case, he reflected. Until now it had been mostly hard work, with very little result. Thank heaven for women like Mrs Schutte, whose

nerves might stand them in good stead through a dubious career but were inclined to break when it came to a question of murder. But he must not allow himself to be too optimistic. It could be just another move in a very complicated game.

At the beginning of Camborne Street he alighted and dismissed the taxi, and walked along until, as he neared No. 15A, the tall figure of Olsen loomed out of the darkness.

"Hallo, Fred," Flash greeted him. "Been waiting long?"

"Five minutes. How're things?"

"Oh, all right. I've one or two surprise items I didn't have before."

"Good." They had reached No. 15A, where they paused. Olsen rang the bell. "I'm hoping this lady is going to give it to us straight this time. I'm getting a bit tired of Mayfair night-life."

Flash was silent, waiting. There was no sound from within, and the "Enter, please" sign failed to operate. After a minute or two he rang again.

"I hope she's not trying to be clever," he said. "Because it won't do her any good."

Olsen stepped back a pace and peered up at the curtained windows. He said, "She must be in. I went round the back just before you arrived and there was a chink of light showing. And I had a word with the boys." He referred to those whose job it was to maintain vigilance over the movements of Mrs Schutte. "They say she had a visitor about five minutes before I showed up. A taxi came along, and the driver rang the bell and went in. He only stayed a couple of minutes, though, and then came down and drove away again."

"Did they get his number?" Flash said quickly.

"You bet they did. They reckoned she must have phoned for him, but it seems a bit odd, doesn't it, just going in and coming out again?"

"Too damn' odd. Let's take a look at the back."

Between that building and the next was situated a narrow alleyway, ambitiously named Munroe Passage. The back premises of the Washwhite Laundry boasted a yard, in which were parked three large delivery vans. The light was dim

here, but an iron fire-escape could be clearly discerned ascending and terminating at the back door of Mrs Schutte's flat.

"That's the way I favour," Flash said, and, switching on his torch, proceeded to assail the fortress. Olsen followed, and the streak of light coming from a faulty blind over the kitchen door acted as a guide to progress. Arriving at the top, they knocked three times, very loudly, and, receiving no response, looked round for means of entrance. The kitchen window, which opened outward, was slightly ajar, and it took very little time to insert a hand, raise the bar, and turn the key in the lock of the door. It opened soundlessly, and they entered, closing it behind them. There was a big square kitchen, the appointments white and brightly shining and the floor and walls were tiled. But the clinical air of cleanliness was marred by a cloud of steam that came from the electric stove, or rather from a percolator reposing on one of the hot-plates. A pungent smell of coffee was everywhere, and the remains of a meal littered a tray upon the table. Carefully Flash removed the percolator with a gloved hand and pulled down the main electric switch.

"I've a feeling she won't be wanting that to-night," he said.

They left the kitchen and switched on the light in the corridor. She lay, as Flash had half expected her to, at the far end by the front door, which was closed. They traversed the intervening space at a run, but it took no more than a cursory glance to confirm that Magda Schutte was dead. Her face was a mass of blood, and a decisive wound had been inflicted upon her left temple.

"This is getting monotonous," Olsen said. At that moment he was not very comfortable inside, and he felt bound to say something. Flash sighed.

"I thought that bit of luck was too good to be true. Bang goes our main witness. It also rules out Bluff completely as far as the killing side of it goes, although I never really thought he did it. What time did you say that taxi-driver came?"

Olsen consulted his watch. The time was now eleven o'clock.

"About ten-forty. I got here at ten-forty-five. You said you might be late, and I had one or two things to do. You think he did it?"

"Why not? A cab-driver's outfit is as good a disguise as any. But if he took that trouble he must have known we had the peepers on this place. Vasquez knew that, too, or he knew we were after him. They seem to know a hell of a lot, these birds. Where's the telephone?"

"In the lounge," Olsen said. "It's a red one. Isn't that typical?"

Magda Schutte wore a dress and coat to match of impeccable cut but in a hideous shade of near-purple. She had no hat, but a magnificent set of silver fox furs and a pair of long grey suede gloves lay across the divan. Perhaps she had dressed herself in philosophical readiness to accompany the two men after she had made her statement. Perhaps she had other plans.

Having put through the necessary call to the Yard, Flash contacted the telephone exchange in order to discover the time of the last call prior to his own. They rang through a few minutes later to say that it was approximately 9.15.

"That was when she got on to the Yard," Olsen said. "It looks as if you're right. That taximan must have come here of his own accord. Because if she rang through to the rank before nine-fifteen he'd hardly take over an hour to get round."

"It might have been pre-arranged, part of some plan she had in mind. But we'll know more when they trace that cab. I gave them the number."

In the interval of waiting they made a preliminary search of the apartment. It appeared that Mrs Schutte had dined alone, and in the absence of her maid had prepared herself a scratch meal from various tins culled from the store cupboard. But she had certainly not stinted herself over the question of drink, for several assorted wine bottles, all empty, stood on the kitchen table, and a decanter of brandy, together with a glass half full, had been left upon a little table by the electric fire in the lounge.

An ash-tray was piled with cigarette-ends, all of the same Turkish blend as those contained in the ebony box beside the divan. In addition to the kitchen and lounge there was a sumptuous bathroom, recently used, to judge by the damp

bath towels which made an untidy heap upon the floor; two bedrooms, one obviously spare and the other her own—the latter ornate and comfortably furnished, and littered with odds and ends of clothing. The windows were shut and locked, and the atmosphere heavy with some overpowering perfume. There was also a small room, empty save for lumber and three large travelling cases. Mrs Schutte's handbag, which was lying on the dressing-table, supplied keys to the locked drawers of a bureau in the lounge, but these revealed only a sheaf of correspondence of no particular interest, a few receipts and bills relating to clothing, jewellery, and other expensive items, and two further bunches of keys. Having found that in no instance did the latter coincide with any of the locks available, Flash said, "The laundry, I'll stake anything. Now how do they link up?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Olsen said. "But I imagine there's no direct communication. If you remember, the end of the fire escape comes out by the back door of the laundry, and she probably used that."

"We'll try it," Flash agreed, but was obliged to put off his investigation, for the front door-bell had begun to ring furiously, and their prompt manipulation of the "Enter, please" gadget brought the police surgeon and other essential reinforcements from the Yard. It was while opening the door of the apartment to admit them that he saw something to cause him no small satisfaction. Upon the ground outside where the carpet ended was inset a large square of coco-nut matting. It did not fit very well, and down one side of the consequent gap had become wedged an article which he picked up and examined with curiosity. It was a small pad of mauve-coloured tickets, numbered boldly and consecutively from 236 to 250. The top one was torn slightly along its perforated attachment. He put it away in his pocket and went inside, narrowly escaping entanglement with the photographic apparatus and other impedimenta brought along to aid the investigation. Olsen was talking to the police surgeon. With them had come Detective-Sergeant Waygood, pink of face and urgent with news.

"I found that young lady, sir," he said to Flash, following

him into the lounge. "At least, I traced her to the flat she's taken at seven Harris Row, Gower Street. But she's not there. And a tenant on the floor below says she went out at about five o'clock this afternoon."

"Thanks," Flash said. "Anything else?"

"Yes, sir. Very important. You remember the appeal we sent out for information anyone could give regarding the Andover Street case? Well, a gentleman named Gorridge has come forward to say that he was going home that way about two-forty-five on the morning in question, and just as he was crossing South Crichton Street a car came dashing out of Andover Street and nearly ran him down. It was a small navy blue coupé, and he took the number, as he intended to report the owner to the police for dangerous driving."

"That's fine," Flash said. "We'll check up on the owner."

"I've done that, sir." Waygood could not conceal his triumph. "It belongs to Josh Ellis, who runs the Carnival Club."

"What's that?" asked Olsen, entering at that moment.

"Josh Ellis," Flash said. "It seems his car was running round Andover Street the morning Vasquez was towed in. About the same time, too."

"No, really?" Olsen looked pleased. "We're beginning to move at last. I wonder what sort of story he'll have to cover that?"

The telephone rang, and Flash went across to answer it. He held the receiver to his ear for several minutes in silence, lighting a cigarette with his free hand the while. His brain was operating in three directions at once. He said presently, "Right. Thanks very much," and hung up.

"They've found that taxi-driver," he said. "The real one, I mean. He was picked up earlier in Bryant Street, just off Soho Square. His story is that he was sitting in his cab outside a house in the square, waiting for a fare who had gone in for a few minutes. He was dozing away when he heard the door of the cab open and close and he turned round to get directions. And the next thing he knew something hit him, and when he

came to he was in hospital. He's not much hurt, just dazed and shaken up from being chucked out into the road, I suppose."

"That crowns it," Olsen said. "Our spurious taxi-driver is the man we want. By the way, Doctor Clyde says she's been dead not more than three-quarters of an hour. But we knew that."

Flash reached for the telephone again.

"D'you mind taking charge out there?" he said. "I've got a spot of telephoning to do on my own account."

"Just as you like," Olsen agreed, and went out, with Waygood in attendance, and Flash dialled a number. He had to wait some three minutes for a reply, and then he said, "Mr Connolly, please," and waited again. "Hallo, Mike," he went on, when the Irishman's voice came booming over the wire. "Frank here. How's tricks?"

"I'm going mad," Michael announced. "Just clean off my head, and so help me, Frank, no one here seems to care. Except my wife, and she's not feeling too good, either. What are you doing?"

"Just nosing around," Flash said vaguely. "Has Miss Page shown up yet?"

"She has not. It's a thing I just can't understand. To-night of all nights, when she's needed most, to do a thing like that. Twice Lilian has had to come in here for a rest, she's feeling that bad, and Sling keeps disappearing off—God knows what's got into him. And Siegman gave notice and walked out just before you left. And the chef's started a hell of a row about nothing. I tell you, I'll have to be head cook and bottle washer before the night's out."

He went on for some considerable time in the same strain, and Flash listened, making intermittent noises of sympathy. He said at last, "Well, I won't keep you, Mike. I expect you've got a lot on hand, and so have I. Just thought I'd find out how things stood. I may look in and see you later. Cheerio."

He rose, stretching himself in the way he had when he was doing some serious thinking. He then left the lounge and, seeking out Olsen, drew him to one side. He said, "If you were coming upstairs to this flat to commit a murder and you

had the instrument of destruction in your pocket, you'd get it out just about as you reached the front door, wouldn't you? Say, after you'd rung the bell and were waiting for the door to be opened, or just before?"

Olsen frowned. "I might—yes, I suppose I would. But this particular lunatic might do anything."

"He was in a hurry," Flash said. "We know that, because he stayed only long enough to do his stuff and skip out. If he'd been a few minutes later we should have copped him. I'd like you to take over here for a bit, Fred. I haven't time to look at that laundry downstairs and so on, but you can take care of that. I want to follow up something right away. I'll take Waygood with me."

"Josh Ellis?" Olsen said, and his colleague grinned.

"Maybe," he said. "But I don't think I'll trouble him just yet. I've got other ideas as to where we may find that car of his . . ."

The telephone rang again, and they both made a dash for it. News had just come through that the missing taxi had been found abandoned in a side turning off the Bayswater Road. And inside it were the hat and coat taken from the original driver.

CHAPTER XVII

TOWARDS midnight Sling, who had been inveigled into joining the table at which sat the Connollys and some of their friends, saw a long-coveted opportunity to escape, and seized upon it. He had been dancing a rumba with Miss Ursula Forthright-hardye, an amiable young lady with excellent manners and no conversation. Her parents, Colonel and Mrs Forthright-hardye, were deeply engrossed with Mrs Connolly, which fact he observed over her shoulder when the music came to an end, so with a polite excuse he deposited her within the parental orbit and quietly lost himself among other dancers returning to their tables. But he had reckoned without Mike, who, coming out of the semi-doze into which

he had drifted, rose hurriedly from the table and caught him up at the door.

"Where d'you think you're heading for?" he wanted to know.

Sling did not pause. "Out to get a drink before they close," he said.

"Before who close? The pubs are all shut now. And haven't we enough drink in this place to float a battleship? Faith, boy, anyone would think this was a milk bar, the way you go on." They had come to a standstill at the side entrance. Michael was too weary to be annoyed. He just had the feeling that if Sling deserted him now he would sit down in the middle of the floor and bellow like a bull. The Forthright-hardye family was not his idea of convivial company at the best of times, and to-night. . . . He went on despairingly, "Look, Sling, I'm not like most bosses, am I? I give you all the freedom you want. And on an ordinary night I wouldn't say a word. But with Siegman and Miss Page out of it, and only that fool kid to look after things. . . ."

"Sorry, Mike, but I've got to get out of here for a bit. I shan't be long."

Michael, recognizing defeat, lit a cigarette and drew on it savagely. He said, "Would it be troubling you too much, Mr Fitzroberts, to ask where you go, when you go?"

But sarcasm was wasted upon Sling. He merely said, "The Carnival Club, just up the road," and was amused when Michael exploded:

"What! That den of iniquity?"

"I know. The company is low, the beer revolting, and they water the whisky. But I've a plebeian side to my nature, Mike, and after the rarefied atmosphere of Connolly's I sometimes need a change. See you later."

He went out, leaving Michael a sad and very puzzled man.

It seemed to Sling, as he walked rapidly up the street, that this night was trying to outdo all others for sheer bleakness, and as he had no overcoat and had just come from the artificial heating of Connolly's, he felt it all the more. He turned in thankfully at the doors of the Carnival, and stood for a moment, surveying the room with an experienced eye. It

was packed to suffocation point, its denizens being evidently determined to take down as much liquor as possible in the limited time left to them. For the club closed at midnight, and despite the lawlessness of his nature, Josh Ellis was very particular on that point.

Ellis now sat at a small table to the right of the bar, with three of his pet cronies. He was playing poker, and, to judge by his lowering gaze, not doing very well. He glanced up sideways as Sling pushed his way to the counter, nodded briefly, and returned his attention to the greasy cards held in his enormous fist. He only rose to greet those whom he termed his 'regulars'. The little barmaid, who was serving three people at once, took in Sling with a comprehensive stare and bestowed upon him one of her pink-toothed smiles. Her lipstick had smudged badly on one side of her mouth, but of this she was happily unaware. She said to him presently, "What'll it be?"

He ordered a double whisky and leant on one elbow to survey the crowd that jostled him.

"Water or soda?"

"Straight," he said. "Or as straight as it comes."

Her smile froze a little, as she slapped down the drink, took the ten-shilling note he offered, and returned with a handful of wet change.

"You'll want a sandwich," she said, flinging a thin and weary-looking object on to a cracked plate and depositing it in front of him. "I've taken for it."

He surveyed it with a mixture of surprise and horror.

"Did I order a sandwich?"

"Rule of the house," she snapped. "No drinks without sandwiches after eleven."

She turned away to pour out three light ales, two double rums, and a brandy, all with quick, dexterous movements of her neat wrists.

He drank his whisky, grimaced over its raw flavour, and when she came his way again, ordered another. She repeated her previous performance, adding a second sandwich to the first, but this time he pushed the plate firmly to one side.

"Take them away," he said. "They're staring at me."

She frowned at him. "It's a rule of the house," she said again. "Mr Ellis is most particular about it."

He laughed outright. "Since when? He didn't used to be so fussy."

"Well, if you don't like it . . ."

"I don't. What's more, I'm not going to have it. If you must serve fly-blown sandwiches, serve them to yourself if you like, but not to me."

She was indignant now, her mouth compressed and belligerent.

"What am I supposed to do with them, I'd like to know?"

"If you weren't such a dear little girl," he said, "I'd tell you."

Several of the surrounding company, including the unhappy possessors of sandwiches, were interested spectators. A short, thick-set man with a repellent face, who was standing alongside, said, "Don't be s' bloody choosy. The kid's on'y doin' 'er job."

Sling turned and looked him over.

"You shut that big slit in your face," he said, "or I'll shut it for you."

There followed a moment's breathless silence, abruptly broken by the gentleman thus addressed. Like a river in full flood there came from his lips a stream of language so vitriolic that the barmaid flushed crimson and turned away. Some one behind him let out a loud guffaw and urged him to action. But Josh Ellis had sidled up, and, pushing him to one side, glared at Sling from under lowered brows. It was evident to him that, no matter what the cause, the prestige of his club was in danger, and he was not a man to hesitate.

"Lookin' for trouble, chum?" he asked, and a thrill of delight went through his hangers-on at the threat in his voice. Sling carefully finished his drink and returned the glass to the counter.

"That's right, chum," he said, and, without appearing to make much effort, jerked back his right arm and hit Josh squarely on the jaw, sending him reeling. The two men at his rear, with an instinct of self-preservation, leapt to one side, and he went down heavily beside the counter. For a moment he just lay there, staring stupidly up at the dirty ceiling. He

was more surprised than hurt. It was so long since anyone had hit Josh that he found it difficult to take in what had happened. But when realization did come the effect was volcanic. He got to his feet, clutching at the counter and at those of his friends who had drawn near to witness this strange event, and his black eyes were narrowed slits of fury. With his chin down and his matted hair hanging in festoons above his brows, he charged at Sling, urged on by shouts and catcalls from his enthralled audience. Then Sling hit him again, twice, and this time he went down and stayed down.

But his cronies were not to be so easily put off. They crowded in, hitting out wildly with more pleasure than purpose, and Sling, who had not much room to manœuvre, was borne to the ground with a struggling heap of bodies on top of him. One of his opponents, small and thin, with an evil face, aimed a kick at his head, which he contrived to avoid by twisting suddenly, so that the blow did no more than bruise his shoulder. He got free then, and crawled out from under the massed bodies, to see approaching yet another assailant, armed with a broken bottle. Crouching, he caught this one by the legs, dragged him down, and rolled a stool on top of him.

The general din was now terrific. Several customers whose credit was no longer good at the Carnival, and whose grievances were legion as a consequence, were taking them out on the furniture. Some one had flung a bottle and smashed the mirror over the bar. A young woman with red hair had thrown a glass of beer over the head of her would-be lover, and was following up her triumph by hitting him in the face with her handbag. It seemed as if every one who had ever longed to pick a quarrel had decided to do so now, under cover of the confusion.

The barmaid, who through it all had valiantly stuck to her post of duty, was demanding payment from a man to whom she had earlier served a drink.

"If you think," she said, "you're going to get away with that——"

He did not allow her to get any further. With more precision than decency he dealt her a punch on the jaw which

sent her, without any more argument, to lie quietly behind the bar. A blond young man and his lady-friend promptly saw their opportunity, and slipped round to help themselves to the till. Josh Ellis was still unconscious, and across his prone body a mixed battle raged, the participants having forgotten, in their present state of exuberant intoxication, the original cause of the disturbance.

Sling, seeing the way momentarily clear, and unnoticed save for an old man in a cloth cap who was crying bitterly on his shoulder, disengaged himself, and, lifting the flap of the bar, made his way to the back premises. All was comparatively quiet here. One room was converted into a rough kitchen, another with a double bed in it was used as a dining-room, and a third was crammed with bottles and crates, both full and empty. A door led on to a dark, dirty passage, with a flight of stairs going up, presumably, to Mr Ellis's private quarters. A humid smell of old clothes and stale beer hung over everything. Another flight of stairs led downward, and these Sling followed, switching on the torch he carried to light the way. They led him eventually to the coal-cellar, from which a further flight of stone steps went upward on the left-hand side, giving access to the garage, the doors of which opened in the front of the premises on to Minton Street. The garage was empty. He gave it but a cursory examination and returned to the coal-cellar, which was half filled with coal on one side and coke on the other. An ill-kept, unwholesome, straggling sort of building, that must once have seen better days but was now the happy home of rats and mice and the proprietor of the Carnival Club.

Something that might have been either a rat or a mouse ran across Sling's foot as he stood in the centre of the cellar thinking. He brought out of his pocket a piece of paper on which was scrawled a rough plan, and examined it by the light of his torch. He put it away again, found a shovel, and, laying the lighted torch on the ground, commenced furiously to work upon the pile of coke, flinging it to one side until it formed a separate mound. He put up a hand to wipe away the blood that had begun to trickle from a cut in his forehead. His usually immaculate shirt-front was torn in ribbons, and

there was a rent in the back of his coat. He found what he wanted at last, a trap-door in the floor, some three feet square, with an iron-runged ladder leading down into complete darkness. Torch in hand, he descended, pulling the door to behind him. He went down a long way and discovered a broad stone passage, which was bitterly cold, with air as clammy as that of a tomb. He moved as quickly as restricted light would allow. The passage wound a little, and came out at last to a heavy wooden door studded with nails and kept in place by an iron bar. The bar was of considerable weight and rusty, but he shifted it at last, and the door swung slowly inward on creaking hinges.

He was about to enter when some instinct warned him of hidden danger. He paused, listening. But ahead was nothing but an inky blackness, and silence. He then cautiously switched off the torch and eased his way in, and at that moment something rushed at him. Half prepared for some such emergency, he caught the onslaught head-on, and gripped an arm raised to strike. He heard a gasp of pain, and the arm immediately became limp. He moved in closer and discovered another arm, and a body. His assailant seemed to be of an unusual kind, warm and soft and perfumed, and was, in fact, a woman. He switched on his torch again and flashed it full on her face, and revealed Christina Page, eyes wide and fearful, hair disarranged, wearing an outdoor coat and clutching an iron crowbar in her hand. He said, "Well, I'll be damned! What are you doing here?" and would have released her. But with a little noise between a sob and a scream she dropped the crowbar and flung up her arms and clung to him. She had pretty, rounded arms and they felt very nice about his neck. In the circumstances there seemed to be only one logical thing to do, and he did it. Only after he had been kissing her for a few minutes did it occur to him that the situation was somewhat incongruous. He said, still holding her, for he had found that she was pleasant to hold, "I'd like to go into this thing seriously, but I haven't time. I didn't come here to make love to you, Miss Page. I didn't even know you were here. And, in any case, I thought you loathed the sight of me."

"I'm sorry." She drew away from him. "But if you'd been shut away in the dark for hours and hours, expecting to die any minute, you'd welcome a monster."

"Is that your idea of a welcome, with a crowbar?"

"I didn't know it was you. It might have been anybody. And how do I know you didn't shut me in here in the first place? You seem to know your way about pretty well."

"Talk sense," he said. "How could I shut you in if I didn't know you were here? Is there another way out, incidentally? That's what I came to look for."

"I only know the way through Mr Connolly's cellar. I tried the door, but it was locked and bolted or something, on the other side." She added doubtfully, "I still think it might have been you who shut me in."

He flashed the torch so that it illuminated his own face, blood-stained and smeared with coal dust, the tattered appearance of his evening dress, and his hands, cut and bleeding. He said, "I look as if I'd been in a scrap, don't I? Well, this place leads through to the Carnival Club, and I had to bust it up in order to get here. Now what would I do that for if I could get in any other way?" He took her nearest hand and held it for a moment, then felt in his pocket and brought out a flask. "Here, have some brandy and you'll feel better. It's good stuff, that. I always fill up at Mike's private filling-station, and he only has the best."

Silently she took it and drank some, feeling it creeping, stealthy and blood-warming, down into her chilled body. She choked a little, and sighed with satisfaction. He took the flask from her, tilted it to his lips, and handed it back again.

"Hold on to that," he said. "You may need it again. Now, where were we? Yes, I want the nearest way out. There are some tough boys back in the Carnival who're going to get nasty if they ever catch up with me. We can talk later."

"It's over there on the other side somewhere. I ran out of matches trying to see the way to open it. You go up some steps, and there's a kind of shutter in the wall which works on a spring, I believe. And on the other side is a ventilator. I expect you've seen it."

"You bet I've seen it. I've stared at that thing till I'm purple

in the face. I'd an idea it wasn't all it seemed. In fact, I spent quite a lot of time down there this evening trying to work it out. You cheer yourself up with the brandy while I do a little investigating."

He flashed his torch slowly round. They were in a squarish vault with plastered brick walls and stone floor and ceiling. Ahead, on the opposite side to where they were standing, was a flight of steps. The room was bare, save for a few empty barrels and crates, a pile of rusting iron, and some old sacks in one corner. He crossed the floor at a run and mounted the steps two at a time. At the top was a wooden shutter, as she had said, but it proved impervious to his first onslaught. It might even be that it only worked from the other side. But he did not want to dwell upon that possibility. Christina stood and watched the circle of light from his torch as he moved it this way and that. The darkness was cold and unfriendly about her. She took another drink from the flask, and felt considerably better. He returned presently, rubbing the dust from his hands on to his already soiled trousers. He said, "No go, I'm afraid. The damn' thing won't budge an inch." He went across to the door, opened it, and listened. Everywhere was completely silent. He fetched a crate and propped it between the door and the jamb. "I'd just hate to have any more surprises to-night. And you never know. Some one might think it riotously funny to bolt us in."

He took her hand again and led her to the corner where the sacks were piled.

"Take a seat," he said, "and tell me all about it."

He flopped down, and cautiously she sat beside him. She said, "Shouldn't we get out of here first? I don't like this place."

"I know," he said, with unaccustomed patience. "It's not exactly a maiden's dream of home and beauty. I've found out what I wanted to know, and I'd like nothing better than to skat. But as I see it there's only one way out at the moment, and that's through the Carnival. There's a garage at the front, but the doors are padlocked. As like as not Josh Ellis, who runs the Carnival, will have come to by now, although I did hit him pretty hard, and if he sees me he's going to meet

me with something even more unpleasant than a crowbar. I wouldn't mind much for myself. I can take care of Josh and his pals any day of the week. But I'm not aiming to get you a black eye into the bargain. And you don't want to be left here alone, do you?"

"No," she said. "No, I don't want to be left alone. Have you a cigarette? I smoked all mine."

"Surely." He brought out his case and offered it to her, taking one himself, and produced a lighter. The ignition sent out a friendly glow, causing the blackness to recede for a few seconds. Then it was gone, and only the illumination from the torch, which he had placed on the ground, served to keep at bay the soft, slithering movements of the rodent life they had disturbed. She asked, "What do you want me to tell you?"

"Anything you know. I think we've been fooling around long enough, don't you? I'll admit I didn't trust you. I've known for some time there was something odd going on around Connolly's, and I had an idea you might be in it. And when you didn't turn up to-night, I thought you'd taken the hint from me and decided to skip. But finding you shut away here . . . well—" He shrugged his shoulders. "What did Vasquez want with you that night you went with him to the Café Noir?"

She turned to look at him, although she could hardly see his face.

"How did you know about that?"

"I followed you. I was in Minton Street when you came out and got into his car, and I grabbed a taxi and went along after. I tailed you until he dropped you off at your place, and then I left him to go his own sweet way. All right, I know what you're going to say. It was none of my business. So it wasn't, but it might have been. What did he want?"

"Nothing." She was too exhausted, mentally and physically, to care any more. "Nothing definite, that is. He asked me a few questions about the club, and the people there. He didn't like you very much. He thought——"

She paused, and he asked quickly, "What did he think?"

"Never mind. It's not important. He was very vague,

really. He asked me if they paid me well, and would I like to make some money? But although I tried to find out what he meant, he wouldn't say how. I didn't want his money, despite what you may think——"

"I don't think anything," he said. "Go on."

"One thing he did make clear. That he wasn't—well, making overtures to me. And he went on to say that he wasn't as wealthy as some people seemed to think."

"And then?"

"There was nothing else. Except that he said he thought I was a very deceptive sort of person. I rather gathered that he had intended making me some kind of proposition, and had then decided I wasn't quite the one for the job, so that he was going to talk it over with some one else."

"Did he say anything about Magda Schutte?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"It seems there was some connexion between those two. I know he brought her to Connolly's once, but I mean something else. What did she say to you this afternoon when she telephoned?"

"Well, she'd phoned earlier, you see, at about half-past nine, to ask if I could tell her anything about Señor Vasquez. She also phoned the club last night, just as we were closing, and Mr Connolly told me to say that he'd gone. So when she came through this afternoon she wanted me to promise not to say anything about her if I was questioned. I suppose she meant by the police. Can you make any sense out of this? Because I can't."

"I don't know." Sling rubbed his chin where a bruise was gradually turning black and blue. "I should think when she phoned the first time she didn't know Vasquez was dead. Then she saw the Press and thought she'd better put herself in the clear by getting on to you again. I may be wrong. But if you keep straight on we'll probably come to something. How did you get here? You haven't told me that yet."

"No. It all seems very unreal even now—particularly now. I thought things over after you'd gone, and I decided that the best thing I could do would be to go over and have a talk with Mr Connolly. Everything was so upside down, and I

felt that until this business was cleared up I couldn't just get on with my job as if nothing had happened. I tried to get him on the phone, but couldn't get through, so I took a chance and came over. I was about to go up the stairs to Mr Connolly's flat when I saw that the door of the club—you know, the one we use—was not properly closed. I thought perhaps he was in there, so I pushed open the door and went in. There was no sign of anyone about. I took a good look round, because I felt something must be wrong. Everything seemed to be locked up and in order until I came to the cellar. And there I found the door open and the light on. I still thought it must be Mr Connolly, especially after last night. I called down, but there was no reply. I thought perhaps I should fetch some one, but then I remembered how touchy Mr Connolly is about policemen. So I went down and found nothing at all, except that the ventilator had been shifted up, leaving a space big enough for a person to get through. I peered down, but I couldn't see anything. I don't know what came over me then, but suddenly I got very angry——”

“I know,” Sling said, “I've seen you do it.”

“Well, it's hard to explain, but it struck me as so unfair that Mr Connolly should be trying to keep his club all nice and proper, and there was some one playing tricks in his cellar. As a matter of fact, I thought it was you.”

“That was good of you.”

“It was reasonable, wasn't it? Everything you had said and done looked suspicious to me. So I climbed through the hole in the wall and found my feet on those steps. I hadn't any sort of light, except a box of matches, but I thought where you could go, so could I.”

“That's not such a bad idea,” Sling said. “What else?”

“How can I tell you if you keep interrupting? I had got about half-way down, guided by the light coming from the cellar, when suddenly it was blotted out. I scrambled up the steps again, and found that the opening had disappeared. At first I thought it was just an accident, and then I realized it couldn't have been, because I heard some one cough on the other side of the wall. Then I knew that whoever it was must have been watching me, and as soon as I'd climbed through

they closed the shutter down on me. I hammered and banged, but it didn't do any good. It was horrible, just standing there in the dark, not knowing where I was or if I'd ever get out again."

Her voice faltered, and Sling leant over and handed her the flask.

"Have another drink," he said.

"Thank you." She was silent for a while, until he asked:

"What sort of cough was it?"

"Oh, just a cough. It was only very faint, but quite unmistakable. There wasn't anything for me to do then but to try to get out some other way. I lighted a match and began to walk down the rest of the steps. But I caught my foot in something and fell down the lot. And then I think I fainted, because a long time after I still found myself lying on the floor. And my foot was bent under me and I think I sprained it."

"For the love of Pete! Why didn't you say so before?"

"It's not important. When you've been expecting to die and you find that all you've got wrong is a pain in your foot you don't think much about it."

"We'll think about it now," he said. "Which one?"

She raised her left foot, and he examined it carefully and began to manipulate it with supple fingers. "What happened then?"

"Well, I lighted a few matches and wandered about a bit, until I found the door you came through, but, as I said before, I couldn't open it. So I gave up at last, and just sat down here and smoked cigarettes. It seems as if I've been here for three days, but I suppose it's only a matter of hours, really."

"It's some time after midnight. My watch has stopped, so I can't say exactly."

"As late as that? What on earth will Mr Connolly think of me?"

"He's been defending you like a gentleman all the evening. But never mind what he thinks. We'll clear that up later."

"There's nothing else to tell, except that I got myself up the steps again once or twice, and knocked and banged in the hope that some one might hear me. But it was so hopeless I didn't try very much. And remembering what happened

last night to Señor Vasquez, I wasn't too keen to be let out by the same person who shut me in. And then you arrived . . ."

"Ah, enter Sir Galahad. I wouldn't mind going over that again, minus the crowbar."

She moved uneasily. "I think my foot is better now," she said. "I'll try it." In silence he helped her to her feet, but she quickly sat down again. "Well, it's a little better, anyway. You haven't told me your side of the story yet."

He did not return to his former seat, but began to walk about within the limited illumination of the torch. He said, "At least we know now which way Vasquez went out. Whoever killed him must have been behind that ventilator while we were playing games in the cellar, and the moment our backs were turned, snatched the body. But then where would they go? There's the garage, but Josh keeps it padlocked, and I assume he has the key."

"You think he did it, then?"

"I don't know. He's a crafty sort of fish, but I shouldn't think he'd commit murder, unless he was drunk at the time. Perhaps he's one of the gang."

"What gang? Don't tell me there are a whole lot of them? That would be awful."

"Flash thinks so. But of course you don't know about that. Our detective friend dropped in for a chat this evening. I rather expected him, but I didn't think he was going to be quite so busy. First he ran round asking every one questions, and we kept very quiet about Vasquez, though personally I think Mike is a fool to try to hush up a thing like that. But that's how he wanted it, so I looked as half-witted as possible and Flash looked at me as if I were a first-class liar, which I suppose I am when necessary. He asked after you, and we tried to head him off. I'd been stringing Mike all the time that I didn't know you'd moved, because he'd have thought I'd run off with you, or something damn' silly. He tried to get you on the phone at your old address, but the gargoyle at the other end froze him off the wire. But Ferrety Flash couldn't leave it at that. He said he was putting a man on to find you. I expect he's still looking, if he was serious. Then he got hold of young Ramon, who said that he'd let

Vasquez in, but that he hadn't seen him go out. Neither, apparently, had anyone else, so Flash jumped at the idea, or pretended he did, that Vasquez left by the side-door. I can't quite see myself why he should have gone down to the cellar, unless he had an appointment with Josh and wanted to keep it dark. And what, I ask you, could be darker than this hell-hole at the moment? But that's not much of a theory, because it doesn't account for Vasquez getting knocked on the head in our cellar.

"But I'm getting away from the point. After a bit I asked old Hawk-eye if he wanted me any more, because I'd an idea he had something on his mind, and wasn't going to talk in front of me. And when he said he wanted a private chat with Mike, and made sure I hadn't got my ear to the door, I knew I was right. So into your room I went and out of the window and along the area to Mike's window, where I was able to listen easily, if not in comfort."

"Used you to peep through keyholes when you were a child?" she put in.

"I always preferred windows. The amount you can see through a keyhole is negligible. You'd be surprised. Where was I? At Mike's window. Flash dithered about for a while, and then blew the gaff, or part of it. He mentioned certain thefts from art galleries and so on that have taken place from time to time, and said he reckoned that Vasquez was in it. Tilbury, too. He was the man who died on New Year's Eve, or rather the morning after. He used to run an antique shop in Mayfair, which, incidentally, Vasquez took over. It's not really important. The main thing is that Flash thinks whoever got rid of Tilbury also did the same for Vasquez. He also reckons that the last lot of stuff they pinched—a couple of pictures—were sent to a laundry known as Washwhite, and from there on to somewhere else. I don't quite know how he worked that out, except that Magda Schutte lives over this place, and she was a close pal of Vasquez."

"I could have told you that," Chris said. "You remember that first evening she came to Connolly's, and I said I felt sure I'd seen her before? I remembered afterwards that it was at the Washwhite Laundry. When I was at the Hotel Rouen

we used to send our stuff there, and I went over once to see them about some things that were missing. And I saw and spoke to Mrs Schutte. But she looked very different then. She was wearing a white cap and overall and hardly any make-up. But I couldn't mistake her face."

"You might have mentioned it before," Sling said.

"Why should I? I didn't think it was any affair of mine. I did go there once, out of curiosity, after Señor Vasquez had behaved in such an extraordinary manner. I had a feeling there was something queer going on. But Mrs Schutte wasn't there that time. So I decided to forget the whole thing. And even if there had been anything worth mentioning, I shouldn't have told you."

"No," he said, "I suppose not. I'd forgotten I was the boy who could do no right. But to get back to the story. I'm still hanging on to that window, and Flash is still probing around, with Mike contesting every inch of the way—you know how he goes on. When Flash mentioned the Washwhite I immediately thought of the Carnival, because I drift in there for a drink every so often—though I doubt whether they'll welcome me in future—and once when I was passing, about nine in the morning, I saw the Washwhite van draw up and take in a load. I don't know why I should remember it, except that the name amused me at the time, and I've got a way of interesting myself in things that have nothing to do with me at all. You've noticed that. But I couldn't very well tell our pet copper, because he'd know I'd been listening, and that would make him like me even less than he does already. So I thought the best thing I could do would be a little reconnaissance on my own. I left them to argue it out, and was going to climb through your window again when I heard Mrs Connolly let out a yell and I guessed she must have seen me. Back I dived to Michael's window just as he and Flash rushed out to see what was going on. There was nothing to do then but to take a chance and climb in. I'd torn my hand on a nail outside, but I covered it up and dusted myself off, and as they were all dashing about like hens I sat down and had a drink and a think."

"And you thought your way down here?"

"It wasn't quite as simple as that. Mike was in a clinging mood, and it took a little time and persuasion to get out of his clutches. And I wasn't at all sure that my idea was right. But I thought there must be something in it, so I made a rough plan of Connolly's and another of the Carnival, or as much as I knew of it, and tried linking them together. And the logical conclusion was that they met somewhere below street-level. I really got the idea from an old boy I ran into at the Carnival earlier in the evening. I had managed to slip out while Mike wasn't looking, and this old cove, after I'd primed him with drink and got him talking, told me that the Carnival and what is now Connolly's used to be owned by the same man. And from what he said I gathered this merchant might have had use for a hidden exit. Well, I'd tried getting out through Mike's cellar, and that wouldn't work, so I thought I'd have a shot at it from this end. But I knew Josh wasn't likely to reveal his guilty secrets just for the asking. So I had to start some sort of a fracas to keep them all busy while I did my scouting."

"You do look a mess," she said. "Was it a very bad fight?"

He laughed. "Not as bad as some. They were all too tight to keep on their feet for long. I'd have liked to have stayed to see the finish. The fun was just beginning when I got out. But if I hadn't left then I should never have found this place, or you."

"But it was rather a drastic measure to take, wasn't it? Suppose you'd found you were wrong and there wasn't any way through?"

"I should have gone back and carved my way out again. But it was worth taking the chance. After all, what made you come creeping through that hole in the wall? You wanted to help Mike, didn't you? Well, in my own peculiar fashion, so did I. It happens that I'm fond of Mike, and I'd hate to see his club go up the spout for want of a little action. God, I'm tired!"

He sank down beside her again and rested his head on his hands. She sat watching him for some time in silence. Her own head ached with sheer weariness and the effort to think

her way clear of confusion. It was something not to be alone any more. The horror of sitting in that unpleasant place for what had seemed like eternity had badly shaken her nerves, but she was recovering by degrees. The knowledge that the door was open, even though she could not see it, made her feel better. But suppose some one were to creep up under cover of the darkness and manage to get it closed again? They might be locked in then, left to die of cold and hunger. Nervously she touched his sleeve.

"Sling?"

"What is it?"

"Couldn't we go and try to carve our way out, as you call it? I don't mind risking a black eye."

"That won't be necessary, I think." He rose, stretching his arms above his head, and in the dim light she saw that he was smiling. "They were kicking up so much din when I left that the police ought to have taken over by now."

"What will you say to them—the police, I mean?"

"I don't know yet. I'll think of something. I'm all for turning the whole thing over to Flash, but I'll have to ask Mike first. Let's take a stroll and see what's doing. Can you walk, or shall I carry you?"

"Don't be ridiculous." She rose and stood firmly on her right foot, the other lightly touching the ground. "Of course I can walk."

He gripped her suddenly by the shoulder.

"I thought I heard something," he said, and moved in silence to the door, where he stood listening. He removed the crate then and, after swinging the door wide, came back to her. He picked up the torch, switched it off, and groped for her hand. "Some one's heading this way along the passage," he whispered. "Hang on to that and don't make a sound, and when I shout for a light switch it on. I'll be over by the door. D'you think you'll be all right?"

"Of course. But do be careful."

But when he had gone a coldness descended upon her, and her mind was filled with countless horrible possibilities. She could hear footsteps now—heavy, stumbling footsteps—and through the aperture she thought she saw a faint light, coming

nearer. She felt she would scream if she just stood there. She bent down and began feverishly to grope about the floor.

"What the devil are you doing?" Sling hissed at her.

"I'm trying to find that crowbar."

"Well, stop it, will you? This is my affair, so you do as you're told for a change and keep out of it."

She did not answer. She had found what she wanted and gripped it lovingly in her right hand and the torch in the other. The light was now a bright circle, bobbing to and fro. The intruder was not more than fifty yards away. With a kind of fatal calm, she waited.

CHAPTER XVIII

MIKE, stricken and desolate, had returned to his wife and her party after Sling's departure. There was nothing else to do. He would have liked to creep away to his office, but was afraid to be alone with his own dismal thoughts. At least, with Colonel Forthright-hardye at the table, any kind of thought was impossible. He dominated the conversation, fierce dark eyes darting to and fro under his bushy brows, and even Mrs Connolly was overshadowed. He fixed Michael with a hypnotizing stare and said, "I was just congratulating your wife, Mr Connolly, on the arrangement of the place. Very charming, very suitable. Pleasant atmosphere, too. Decent crowd of young people. It's the sort of place where a man doesn't mind bringing his wife and daughter."

He turned upon his only child a glance of heavy paternal affection, and she smiled prettily. Michael, to whom such a testimonial would have been as the breath of life in the ordinary way, nodded gloomily, and tried not to look as unhappy as he felt. Mrs Connolly, sensing his discomfiture, smiled, but her smile was beginning to reach the mask-like stage.

"What happened to Mr Fitzroberts, dear?" she asked.

"He's gone out for a few minutes. Urgent telephone call. He won't be long."

"Wonderful invention, the telephone," the colonel said. "For emergencies, of course—none of this frivolous business. If there's one thing I can't stand, it's people using the telephone needlessly. But in case of dire need, it's a wonderful thing. I remember when I was in Canada, in Winnipeg, to be exact. . . ."

He was off on a monologue that sounded as if it might go on for ever. His wife, small, plump, and impassive as a statue, appeared to be asleep with her eyes open. Miss Ursula, hands in lap, sat wistfully staring in the direction where her late dancing-partner had disappeared. Michael leant upon the table, a glass of brandy before him, listening without hearing and earnestly praying for the end. It seemed to him that he had been sitting there for hours, even days, as one anecdote merged into another in a continuous stream, a stream that nothing short of sheer blatant rudeness could break. But he saw his chance at last. Glancing up, he observed Ramon standing in the doorway, looking wildly round the crowded room. He rose, with dignity and relief.

"Pardon me, Colonel, but I must leave you for a moment. The boy is in some kind of trouble. We're a little short-handed to-night. Nothing serious, but these things happen. One of the difficulties of running a club, you know. I'll be back. I'd like to hear more about those bears. I never should have thought bears could be so intelligent."

He avoided Lilian's reproachful eyes and departed, and Ramon welcomed him with inarticulate cries of joy.

"It is Mr Flash again, sir. He is here, and wishes to speak with you."

"The devil he does," Michael said, and went along the corridor, to find Flash, in company with Waygood, awaiting him.

"Hallo, Mike." There was a coldness in the detective's manner that Michael, in his present mood of sensitivity, found particularly jarring. "Is Mr Cunningham here to-night?"

"Jim Cunningham?" Michael frowned. "I think so. At least, I saw him earlier. But I don't know if he's still here."

"He is here, sir," Ramon put in. "I personally admitted him, and he has not yet left."

"He might have gone by the side-door," Flash said.

"No, sir. Nobody but the staff leaves by the side-door now. I watch them." Ramon was quietly triumphant. "Mr Cunningham you will find in the bar."

"Right. I'd like to have a word alone with you, Mike. Waygood, you hang around and keep an eye on things. You'll find the telephone switchboard at the back there. The moment you see Cunningham come out, give three rings through to Mr Connolly's office."

He strode across and opened the door and Michael, too depressed to make much protest, followed. But with the door closed upon the inquisitive eyes of his one-man staff he recovered something of his usual spirit.

"Now see here, Frank," he began, "you can't just walk in here and start running my club for me without telling me what it's all about. Switchboards and signals and C.I.D. men poking around in corners. I don't know what things are coming to."

"I do," Flash said. "Sit down, Mike, I've got a lot to say."

Michael sat, ran a hand through his hair, poured himself a drink, and pushed the bottle across the table.

"Help yourself," he said sullenly.

"Not now, thanks. I've other things to think about. Mike, I've been in some unpleasant situations in my time but this is about one of the worst I've tackled. We're old friends; I've always liked and trusted you, and I never thought it would be otherwise. But you've let me down badly, I must say."

"What are you driving at?" Michael asked, suddenly very quiet.

"You know damn' well what I'm driving at. Vasquez. He was murdered in your cellar, wasn't he? Here, on these very premises, he met his death. Now you're not going to try to tell me it happened without you knowing anything about it?"

For a moment it looked as if Michael might make the attempt. He avoided the detective's direct gaze, swallowed

several times, and stared about him for inspiration. But his usual loquacity and gift for invention had temporarily deserted him. He was too exhausted mentally to fight any longer. He said wearily, "Well, what of it? He was here all right, lying on the cellar floor when Sling went down to fix the lights."

"That young devil——" Flash was beginning, but Michael stopped him.

"It wasn't his fault, Frank. He'd have got on to you right away, but I wouldn't let him. And why should I?" Indignation was returning, reviving his belief in the justice of his own cause. His one eye flashed, and he finished his drink and jerked the bottle towards him. "You know what it would have meant to me, having policemen tramping all over the place. Why should I be persecuted like this? I haven't done anything, have I? Was it my fault that Tilbury chose to come here and die? And then Vasquez. Why couldn't they do it somewhere else? And it wasn't as if his body stayed here. It disappeared, just like that, and who would have believed it, if we'd told them? And you got your body in the end, didn't you? I don't see you've got so much to shout about."

"I suppose it hasn't penetrated that bull head of yours that finding a body miles from the scene of the crime doesn't help the police much, and that if you'd told me where it was in the first place, without all this quibbling, my job would have been a lot easier. You're nothing but a great big kid, Mike, and that's a fact."

Michael, resting his head on his hand, glowered at the desk in front of him and said nothing. Flash went on:

"Well, it's all over now, no thanks to you. I'm not going to do anything about it this time, but I'd like you to realize that if it had been anyone else they wouldn't have been so easy on you. And another thing. You'd better have a little more respect for the law in future, or Connolly's will be out of business. I don't enjoy this sort of thing, Mike, but some one's got to talk straight to you for your own good."

The Irishman looked up then. He asked, "How did you find out?"

Flash was about to answer when the telephone rang three times. Swiftly he moved to the door and opened it a chink, and Michael followed, breathing heavily, and peered over his shoulder. Mr Cunningham was strolling down the corridor towards the cloakroom, where Ramon awaited him in proud proprietorship. There appeared to be no one else about. Cunningham, who was wearing an overcoat and white scarf over his evening dress, paused and glanced casually round while fumbling in his pocket for a cloakroom ticket, which he brought out and passed across the counter.

"Just a parcel," he said.

"*Sí, Señor.*" Ramon seized the ticket and moved among the numbered items, returning presently with a large cardboard container, tied with string, the kind in which a suit is usually packed by the tailor.

"That's it," Cunningham said, and dived into his pocket again for some loose change. But Flash had stepped out of the office and was by his side on the instant. Waygood had also appeared, and stood idly in the background. Flash said,

"Good evening, Mr Cunningham. Might I have a word with you?"

The man turned to survey him without interest.

"Anything special, Inspector? I'm in rather a hurry just now."

"If you'll come with me into Mr Connolly's office for a moment. . . ."

Cunningham's face had suddenly turned a shade even more red than usual. He looked as if he would like to argue, but evidently thought better of it, and was moving away when Flash said, "You've forgotten your parcel," and picked it up and followed. Michael, seeing them approaching with Waygood still in the background, opened the door wide, and greeted Cunningham with a worried smile. The latter ignored him, and, standing in silence, waited for hostilities to begin. Flash did not keep him waiting long. He said, "If you've no objection I'd like to examine the contents of this parcel."

"On the contrary, Inspector, I've a very strong objection. I am a guest here and you have no authority—"

"I've a warrant for your arrest," Flash said.

"On what charge, I should be interested to know?"

"Receiving stolen property, Mr Cunningham."

Michael, watching in horror and amazement, saw the detective undo the string and lift the lid, revealing an abundance of straw and tissue paper and finally two oil-paintings in narrow gilt frames, one depicting cattle by moonlight and the other cattle at daybreak. Flash examined them with care, noting with particular satisfaction the small, red-numbered label on one, and the absence of a similar article on the other.

"That," Cunningham said decisively, "is not my parcel. There must be some mistake."

"Really?" Flash was amused. "I'm afraid you'll have to find a better explanation than that, Mr Cunningham. Meanwhile, if you'll accompany us to headquarters . . . We'll go by the side-door, Mike, and I'll call in and see you to-morrow. I've a lot of things to do just now."

But Michael, almost in tears at the sight of one of his cherished guests so ignominiously treated, followed hard upon their heels and watched while Waygood collected from the pop-eyed Ramon the two separate halves of the cloakroom ticket, casting anxious glances around the while to make sure that no critical eyes witnessed this alarming scene. Catching up with Flash at the door, he clutched him by the arm and said in an urgent whisper, "It's all too much for me, Frank. I can't pretend to understand any of it. But you'll keep it quiet, man? You'll come in and tell me all about it, and we'll work out something—for old time's sake?"

"I'll come in," Flash said. "But I can't promise anything, Mike. This has gone too far. I'll do what I can, you know that."

Waygood was standing in the porch of the side-entrance with the now philosophical Cunningham. As Flash joined them a policeman came dashing by, and, stopping at sight of them, said breathlessly, "There you are, sir. Can you come quickly? There's trouble down at the Carnival."

"What sort of trouble?"

"They're fighting like tigers, sir. The sergeant said you'd want to know."

"We'll soon put a stop to that," Flash said. "Take him along, will you, Waygood? I've a dozen men parked up the street in case of trouble. We'll settle this business once and for all."

Sheer pandemonium reigned in the Carnival Club when they arrived. Half the furniture was smashed to pieces and legs of chairs and tables, empty bottles, and a mass of broken glass lay in confusion about the floor. Amidst all this chaos sprawled the unconscious bodies, male and female, of those overcome by the alcohol to which they had freely helped themselves and the struggle that had raged about them. The rest fought on, unaware as yet that Nemesis was approaching. Then the police joined in, and shouts and curses were re-doubled as the fight was brought to an inglorious conclusion.

Josh Ellis, returning slowly to life, found himself screened by a pile of broken furniture, and took advantage of his luck while the police were otherwise occupied. Turning his aching body over, he crawled with animal-like stealth along by the counter, under the flap, and to the comparative safety of the other side, where he made a bolt for the back premises. But Flash saw him go and was after him in a second, with the sergeant bringing up the rear. Josh had a fair start and the advantage of knowing his way. By the time they reached the dark and unpleasantly smelling passage he had disappeared.

"Up or down, sir?" the sergeant asked, pulling himself up short to avoid cannoning into Flash, who had stopped.

"Down," Flash said. "There's a passage below somewhere that leads through into Connolly's, and my guess is he's trying to get out that way."

He switched on a powerful torch and charged down the stairs, with the sergeant in hot pursuit. But they found the door of the coal-cellar locked against them, and it was some time before they succeeded in forcing it. Once inside, they made a rapid inspection, taking in the garage to make sure their quarry had not escaped that way. But the garage was empty and the doors firmly padlocked, so they returned to search about among the coal and coke and odds and ends of debris.

"There should be a trap-door here somewhere," Flash said. "Now where . . . ? This will be it."

They opened it up and made the descent into blackness slowly and with care. Flash was not risking any broken limbs at this stage. Everything was very silent below, the broad stone passage giving no hint that anyone had passed recently along that way. They walked, one behind the other, for what seemed a very long time. And then to their ears came sounds, not very clear but unmistakable—a hoarse yell that might have been expressive of pain or fury or a mixture of both, the shuffle of feet, a man's voice shouting something, a thud, and then silence. Flash broke into a run, and a few minutes later burst in through the doorway of the vault-like chamber at the end of the passage.

"What's happening here?" he demanded, and moved his torch in a rapid semicircle, bringing the light to rest upon the ground, where lay Josh Ellis, once again unconscious. Sling, who was bending over him, looked up at the sound of the detective's voice and grinned in the blinding light. He said:

"Glad to see you, Inspector. Come along in and join the party. It was just beginning to get dull."

A woman's voice, slightly hysterical, spoke out of the darkness.

"It seems as if I'll never have a chance to use my crowbar," it said, and there came the ring of metal as it slipped from a hand to the ground. Sling straightened himself and leapt over his fallen adversary towards her. But she had already collapsed in a dead faint upon the pile of sacking.

CHAPTER XIX

CLOSING time at Connolly's had not come too soon as far as Michael was concerned. With relief he saw his guests depart, and hastened, as much as good manners would allow, those who showed any disposition to linger. Fortunately his staff gave him no cause for complaint on that score. They had

had long practice in the art of getting themselves dressed and away from the scene of their work in the shortest possible time. Not that Mike cared much what they did once he had the front door locked and bolted and no longer had to be polite to anyone. Sling's failure to return had seriously annoyed him, however. And Mrs Connolly, whom he insisted should keep close by him because, he said, he was fed up with people disappearing, did not help matters by saying, "Well, really, dear, I do think you're making a great deal of fuss about nothing. After all, what has happened? Miss Page has taken the evening off, and you say they arrested Mr Cunningham. I can only think that was *entirely* a mistake. I always knew that inquisitive Mr Flash would do something stupid, but you would encourage him. But of course we can straighten it all out to-morrow. As for Sling, you must admit he's always been a little eccentric, darling. I like the boy, and he's very useful, but one never could rely upon him. I expect he's gone off somewhere and will phone you in the morning."

"If he's done that," Michael said, "I'll not be talking to him, on the phone or anywhere else. What in hell's that?"

The silence in the club which had followed the departure of its habitués was broken by a loud banging upon the side-door. Mrs Connolly said, "That is probably Sling. And it sounds as if he's been drinking."

"Why doesn't he kick the door down and have done with it?" Michael grumbled, and strode out to fling the door wide and glower at this wanton disturber of the peace. Sling was there, carrying Miss Page in his arms, rather as if she were a doll. Her eyes were closed, and under the light of the porch her face looked deathly pale. Michael said in alarm, "Where did you find her, boy? She's not dead, is she?"

"What a question to ask! Would I be grinning all over my face if she were?"

"I don't know." Surprise had frozen Michael into immobility of thought and action. "You might do anything."

Mrs Connolly, who had appeared behind him, said in exasperation, "Must you two stand there arguing about nothing? The poor child looks terrible. You had better bring

her into my room. It's more comfortable there. You look dreadful yourself, Sling. What *can* you have been doing?"

"Looks as if he's been in a fight," Michael said, his interest awakening at the thought, and his wife, walking with him behind Sling along the corridor, turned to survey him coldly.

Within the green and white splendour of her beautifully furnished sanctum, they laid Miss Page upon the sofa, and brought her round with Michael's inevitable brandy. She opened her eyes and glanced about with a dazed expression. She murmured, "I'm terribly hungry."

"Poor girl," Mrs Connolly said. "Sling, go and get her something from the kitchen, there's a good boy. You might bring something for all of us. I hardly touched dinner myself, and it's been a most strenuous evening."

Looking anything but a good boy, Sling went. Michael, feeling awkward and superfluous, said, "I'll get a couple of bottles of wine, dear. We'll be wanting something to drink," and hurriedly left them. By the time he returned his wife had bathed Miss Page's foot with water brought from the miniature wash-place adjoining the room, and had bandaged it with remarkable efficiency. Smiling faintly, Miss Page said, "Thank you very much, Mrs Connolly. It is most kind of you."

"Not at all, my dear. I'm a positive *expert* at this sort of thing. I was trained as a V.A.D., you know. So very useful. Michael dear, can you imagine what Miss Page has been telling me? Really, if her temperature were not normal I should take it she was delirious. The poor child has been locked in a cellar or something under the Carnival Club for hours and hours, in the dark and without any food. They just pushed her down the stairs and left her. She might have been killed. As it is her foot is strained, and heaven knows that is bad enough. I remember I once had a strained wrist, and it was *dreadfully* painful. But wouldn't you think the police could do something about that club, Michael? It should have been closed ages ago. By the way, what were you doing there, Miss Page?"

Christina sighed. Explaining anything to Mrs Connolly was always difficult, for she rarely took in details that had no

bearing on herself or her immediate surroundings. Sling came in just then and saved her from further embarrassment. He had washed the blood and coal dust from his face and hands, and looked slightly more civilized. And he bore a tray of sandwiches, the remains of a cold chicken, and a trifle that had brought tears to the eyes of the chef on viewing its glorious completion.

"When he finds out what I've done," Sling said, "our chef is going to make passes at me with a carving-knife. But to-night we live." And he served out the food and the burgundy Michael had supplied and sat down on a green leather pouffe at the end of the sofa with every evidence of satisfaction.

"This is all very fine," Michael said, "but I'm still waiting to hear how you came to find Miss Page."

The sound of further knocking upon the side-door broke upon them, and Sling got reluctantly to his feet.

"That'll be your pal Flash," he said. "I'd better let him in. He said he'd drop round and tell us all the latest news after he'd locked up his catch for the night. What a man!"

He went out and returned in a few minutes with the detective, who looked tired but happier than he had done for a long time. He greeted the Connollys with a nod and a smile, and asked, "How are you feeling, Miss Page?"

"Better, thank you. I'm being very well looked after, as you see."

Michael, ever the thoughtful host, poured out a further glass of wine and handed it to the new arrival. He said, "Make yourself at home, Frank. We're having a kind of picnic. Care for a sandwich?"

"No thanks. This'll do me very well." He drank deeply, sat down on one of Mrs Connolly's green hide chairs, and let his glance come to rest upon Sling. "Have you told Mr Connolly about the cellar?"

"Haven't had a chance. And I thought it would sound better, coming from you."

"Right. Well, it's this way, Mike." He launched into a description of the vault and passage linking Connolly's Club with the Carnival, while Michael listened, his one eye staring

incredulously, a smoked salmon sandwich forgotten in his hand.

"And d'you mean to say," he demanded at last, "that those murderin' villains had a way into my club and I knew nothing about it?"

"I'm assuming you didn't," Flash said unkindly. "But don't start getting worked up, Mike. We've had enough excitement for one night, I'm sure. Josh Ellis is in jail, along with some of his mates, and we've taken over the Carnival for the time being. We've also put a seal on the opening this end, so you've nothing to worry about."

Michael breathed heavily for several seconds, trying to control his emotion. He said then, "I'm a peaceful, patient sort of man, Frank, and I like to keep out of trouble. I may have overdone it a bit, by your lights, but I'm not going to argue with you over that. All I'm asking before I go off my head is *how did you find out about all this?*"

"I'll tell you," Flash said. "You remember the first time I called here yesterday evening we were talking in your office and a telephone call came through for me. It was a message passed on by the Yard from a woman named Magda Schutte, a friend of Vasquez. She came here once with him. We'd interviewed her earlier, and some time after we left she got on to the Yard and said she wanted to see me urgently. I went straight over after I left here, but when we got into her flat she was dead."

"What, another murder?" Michael interrupted, and looked anxiously about as if wondering what he might expect to see next.

"Another murder, as you say. She had been struck in the face and on the head with some heavy instrument—the same sort of thing that killed Vasquez. And down beside the matting in front of the main door I found a partly used pad of cloakroom tickets, very similar to those you have here."

In silence Michael poured himself a measure of brandy and drank it down. The wine, apparently, had failed to touch him where he needed it most. Flash went on, "When I saw those everything seemed to form into a complete picture. I wasn't sure, mind you, but I'd a pretty good idea in my head.

It became almost a certainty when I got through to you on the phone, and you said that Siegman had just walked out."

"That little rat," Michael said, in contemptuous remembrance. "To tell you the truth, Frank, I wasn't sorry to see him go. Imagine him talking to me like that. Believe me, when he comes begging for his job back I'll be thinking twice before I give it to him."

"You've missed the point," Flash said, patient to the end. "He didn't give notice on the spur of the moment. It was done deliberately, so he would have the chance of getting out without any delay or suspicion being aroused. When we got to his place in Notting Hill he was rapidly making preparations for departure. He intended catching the first plane to Marseilles in the morning."

"What would he want to do that for?" Michael asked in surprise. "He could always get a job in London, although I'd be the last man to give him a reference, after yesterday."

Mrs Connolly, who had been listening with hard, bright eyes, leant over and patted his hand. She said, "I think Mr Flash is trying to explain, dear, that Siegman was even worse than we thought. He was wanted by the police. What a horrible man. I'm so glad he's gone. What did you want him for, Mr Flash?"

"Murder," Flash said. "At least, that's the chief charge against him. Tilbury, Vasquez, and Mrs Schutte."

After that they just sat there, staring, and Christina Page closed her eyes and looked as if she might faint again. Only Sling appeared unconcerned, leaning against the table, consuming a liberal portion of trifle with a long spoon and considerable enjoyment. Flash said, turning to him, "It doesn't seem to surprise you, Mr Fitzroberts."

"No," Sling said. "As a matter of fact, it doesn't. I happened to overhear a conversation between you and Mr Connolly, when you were giving out a theory about these robberies and the laundry run by Mrs Schutte. And I knew that, although we never deal with that particular laundry, the Carnival does, or did. I also knew that buyers of art treasures don't frequent a fox-hole like the Carnival, but we do have

among our members here quite a number of collectors, some of them on the sharp side. So the inference was that there must be a link-up somewhere between this club and the Carnival, and Siegman was the obvious go-between. I never liked him, anyway."

Flash was regarding him with a glint of amusement in his eyes, quickly suppressed. He said shortly, "One of these days, Mr Fitzroberts, you'll overhear something that won't do you any good." And returning his attention to Michael, "I assume that the rest of you have been too concerned with your own affairs to keep your ears to the ground, or to windows, or any other place, so I'll finish the story. Siegman was with you nearly four years, wasn't he? Well, about eighteen months ago, Alfred Tilbury, who ran the Art Treasures Emporium, roped him in on a nice little scheme that worked without a hitch right up to the time of his death. Naturally, in his line of business he met a lot of collectors, most of them legitimate, law-abiding folk. But there were a few, not really genuine but posing as such, who were prepared to pay high prices for the very rare items belonging to museums and galleries and private people who had no intention of selling. That didn't worry Tilbury. He was a member here, and he knew that Siegman had been in jail once for passing off faked pictures as genuine. That was years ago, and under another name, and, to do Siegman justice, he was trying to go straight. But he has a wife in a sanatorium, and he was afraid of losing his job. He was also badly in need of money at the time for his wife's expenses and so on, and I suppose it sounded very tempting.

"From his past experience, he knew quite a few members of the criminal classes, and he was able to arrange it all very satisfactorily. Tilbury, who knew this club long before you took it over, Mike, and when it was much less respectable, also knew that there was a hidden way out of the cellar, because in those days this and the Carnival were run by the same man, who had a passion for getting out quickly at sight of a policeman. So Siegman contacted Josh Ellis, who knew he'd got a trap-door leading to an underground passage but couldn't get beyond the door at the end because the iron

bar was fixed on the other side. Josh, of course, always ready to make a bit, came in without any argument.

"Then there were two gentlemen named Pete Jennings and Bluff Bailey, who were also willing to do their share. Tilbury used to advertise regularly in the personal column of the *Morning Envoy*, and every now and then, when he wanted a job pulled, he'd put in a special advert. in code. On seeing that, whichever of these boys was indicated would call at the Carnival Club the same day, and get his instructions from Josh, who had already received them from Siegman, via Tilbury. And this is where Mrs Schutte comes in. She was Tilbury's girl friend at the time, and she owned a laundry in Camborne Street called Washwhite. She lived over it, which was very convenient, because immediately one of these robberies had been pulled—the day after the advert.—a phone call would be put through to Mrs Schutte and she'd send out a van. This would ostensibly be to collect laundry from either Pete or Bluff—whoever had done the job—but hidden in the basket would be the stolen property. As soon as the van came back she'd do a bit of fiddling in her private office, and transfer the goods to a basket of clean laundry and send it out for delivery to the Carnival. That may sound a bit risky, but it wasn't really, because for these jobs she used a special basket with a false bottom that would take anything of reasonable size. And who'd suspect a laundry van? I didn't tumble to it at first.

"Once Josh took over he'd deposit the stuff down below in the vault, and Siegman would come through from his side, make it into an unrecognizable parcel, and bring it up to the cloakroom. He was pretty conscientious, wasn't he—usually here before anyone else, bright and early on the job. You bet he was. It wouldn't have done for him to turn up early only when he had something special on. Meanwhile, Mrs Schutte would phone through to Tilbury at the Emporium to say that his laundry was ready. He did actually send his stuff to her, ironically enough, or perhaps it was economy. He was a bit on the mean side, so they tell me. And the same evening he would come along here, plus the prospective buyer. They would put their clothes in the cloakroom, and Siegman would

label them all up nicely with tickets. At the same time Tilbury would pass him a packet containing his share of the proceeds and that of Josh Ellis and the one who pulled the job. Over dinner, or drinks, or whatever it was they had, the purchaser would hand over the money he had agreed to pay Tilbury, and when they came back to collect their coats and so on he would also receive from Siegman the parcel containing the goods. Thus if anyone happened to be around it would all look perfectly normal. No one would be likely to notice that Siegman stuck to the small package Tilbury gave him in the first place, and handed over another, and sometimes larger one, to the other man.

"Next day, because he wouldn't be able to do it any sooner, Siegman would pass to Josh, via the cellar, the money due to him and to the other member of the gang, who would call in at the Carnival for it some time. And every one was happy."

Flash paused for breath and a little liquid refreshment. Mrs Connolly lighted a cigarette. For once she had nothing to say. Michael too was silent, his brain having ceased to function some time ago. Sling, who had finished his impromptu meal, was smoking one cigarette after another and wandering about the room. Christina sat up slowly and leant for support against the wall. She said, "It's incredible. Mr Siegman always seemed such a quiet, unobtrusive sort of man. But even if he was crooked, Inspector, why should he suddenly start murdering people?"

"He's a complex character, Miss Page. In the first place, he suffers from a sense of inferiority, which he tries to get over by being efficient in his job. He was quite sincere about that, I believe. And possibly if he hadn't been in a jam over money, and Tilbury hadn't got after him . . . but we won't go into that. The fact is that he's quiet and unobtrusive, as you say, until he feels he's being unjustly treated. Then he flies into a rage, and that's when he's dangerous."

"I know some one else who does that," Sling said, and glanced across at Christina, but she appeared not to have heard. She said, "Did this man Tilbury treat him unjustly, then?"

"That's what he says. Apparently he felt he was taking a good deal of risk and not getting a lot out of it, and he told Tilbury so. But Tilbury wouldn't listen. I suppose he felt that having a hold over Siegman he didn't have to pay him much. The climax came over the last job done by Pete Jennings. Siegman made up his mind that he was either going to get more money or quit. Mr James Cunningham was the buyer of the goods on that occasion, and he and Tilbury arranged to meet here on New Year's Eve. But rather indiscreetly Siegman phoned Tilbury at the Emporium, saying he must see him, and that he'd be at the club earlier that day. It was the only way to contact Tilbury at short notice, because he was an elusive bird. Apparently he went straight round to consult Mrs Schutte, who was partly the brains of the concern, called in at his home to dress for dinner, and then came over here early on New Year's Eve to see what it was all about.

"He was furious, because the whole idea of this complicated organization was that neither he nor Mrs Schutte need ever do anything that would be likely to arouse the slightest suspicion. Tilbury had a nasty temper, and Siegman caught it right in the neck, and that made him mad. So he pitched some yarn about the stolen goods not being right, and down goes Tilbury to investigate. And while he is floundering about in the dark Siegman hits him with a heavy piece of iron he'd found down there. He thought Tilbury was dead, then, and reckoned to get him out later through Josh Ellis's garage."

Mrs Connolly had recovered her power of speech at last. She interrupted, "But how could he *hope* to do that, Mr Flash? He's not very tall, and Mr Tilbury was a big man. I remember him frightfully well. He had such nice manners."

Flash looked at her with a hint of admiration for a woman who could keep her poise in such trying circumstances. She might have been discussing a couple of guests at a recent tea-party, she sounded so impersonal. He said, "It isn't always the tallest people who have the most strength, Mrs Connolly. Siegman may not be very big, but he's tough. He could have done it all right. But he didn't have the

chance. It was nearly opening time by then, so he came upstairs again to await an opportunity. Later Cunningham arrived, and to put matters right Siegman told him that Tilbury had phoned to say he wouldn't be along that evening, but they could do the transaction without him, which they did.

"But Tilbury, meanwhile, had recovered a bit from the blow on his head and had got out through the Carnival, and came storming round here in a rage, arriving just as Cunningham was about to leave. But before he could say anything he collapsed with a heart attack, and the rest of that you know. Siegman, hearing he was at the door, promptly disappeared, and only came back later when the coast was reasonably clear. Cunningham had a shrewd idea that something was afoot, but he had paid his money and got the goods, so off he went. Siegman split the spoils as usual, this time keeping the lion's share for himself, and decided he'd had enough. But he was reckoning without Mrs Schutte."

He paused again, and Sling, whose wandering had brought him back to the table, said, "Have a sandwich, Inspector. Caviare. And another glass of burgundy. You've earned it."

"Thanks. I think I will. I haven't eaten for I don't know how long. As I was saying, Mrs Schutte knew that Siegman had phoned Tilbury, and that the latter had intended to come round here early on New Year's Eve. She realized that they could not carry on without some one to take Tilbury's place, and although she had a nice sum of money in the bank she was not going to see a profitable organization go phut. So she enlisted the help of Vasquez, whom she had just met, and who was coasting around for some new way of getting rich quick. He had tried several times to get in touch with Tilbury, through Cunningham, as the Emporium game seemed to offer plenty of scope to a man with a little capital and various contacts abroad. After Tilbury died he met Mrs Schutte, and she put up half the money for him to purchase the Emporium from Mrs Tilbury, who, incidentally, knew nothing about her husband's illicit dealings. In fact she seems to know nothing about anything.

"Mrs Schutte was convinced that Siegman had brought about Tilbury's death, and she scared him into agreeing to

carry on as before, though it was under protest. It was then that they hit on the scheme of getting some one to take his place, because Vasquez approached Miss Page, so she tells me."

"What?" Michael, silent for so long, leapt to his feet as though stabbed from behind. "The dirty little . . . I'm glad he got killed, whoever did it." He was still somewhat confused as to the exact details.

Flash hastened to add, "Miss Page wisely refused to encourage him, although she had no idea what he was driving at, and he presumably thought better of it, because he let the matter drop. Then they decided to try out the organization as it stood, to see if it still worked all right. The result was the disappearance of Sir Meredith Jordan-Combe's two pictures.

"We suspected Bluff Bailey, but we couldn't immediately get our hands on him, so we went round to the Carnival, because we knew he'd called there the night before the robbery. And that was where Josh Ellis made the first slip. He was scared out of his wits by our questioning, and tried to get through to Siegman at his home to tell him. Siegman had been out all the afternoon visiting his wife, and didn't get the call until late. It was his evening off, but he decided to take a chance and come down here and remove the pictures, because they were not due to be collected until the following night. Josh agreed to leave the key in the garage so he could pack them in the car and drive off without, they hoped, anyone being the wiser. Of course, up to then they'd all felt pretty safe, using Connolly's as a cover, because they knew we wouldn't be very interested in a club like yours, Mike—professionally, I mean. But with Bluff on the run anything might happen. We were tailing Vasquez and Mrs Schutte, too, and I think they rumbled it, because the night he died they had dinner together, and afterwards she went home and he came on here. He must have had much about the same idea as Siegman, for as soon as he found the opportunity he made a dive for the cellar. At least, that's my guess, because he'll never be able to tell us now. But Siegman got there first. He purposely left it until midnight because he reckoned there would not be so many people about, and he could slip in through the side-door unnoticed, having a key. He had just

about got the ventilator open when down came Vasquez, and there was a bit of an argument. Siegman flew into a temper then, and switched off the lights at the main so as to have a better chance of tackling Vasquez, who would have been a match for him in a fair fight. There followed a struggle, but eventually he dotted Vasquez on the head with the same thing he'd used on Tilbury. He was carrying it about with him then. He said it gave him a sense of comfort. What an idea! By that time he was in a proper sweat over the whole thing, and when he heard some one coming he'd no time to do anything but disappear through the ventilator and close it down. It works on a spring catch, incidentally, which he explained to me. It's easy enough to operate when you know how. He waited on the other side for some time, hearing people moving about and talking——"

"I should like to know," Mrs Connolly put in, and her voice had an edge to it, "who those people were?"

Michael shifted about uncomfortably, and looked at Sling, who said, "It was me, Mrs Connolly. I was talking to myself. I often do it, particularly when I'm worried. And who wouldn't be worried, finding a dead man who seemed to have knocked himself on the head? But he disappeared afterwards, as soon as my back was turned. Isn't that so, Inspector?"

"He certainly disappeared," Flash said, not wishing to be the cause of a domestic breach. "Siegman waited until everything was quiet again, came back, and dragged the body through on to the other side."

"But, my dear boy, why didn't you *tell* some one?" Mrs Connolly persisted. "After all, one doesn't as a rule find such a thing, and I think it was your duty——"

"I didn't want to spoil your birthday," Sling said quickly. "Go on, Inspector. The suspense is killing me."

"Well, he was safe for the time being, but he had to think out a radical change of plan. And it occurred to him that the best thing he could do was to get away from Connolly's and skip the country as soon as possible. He had no ties, other than his wife, who was well provided for. In case anything happened to him he had bought the house in her name, and always paid the bulk of his money into her account. But to

put his scheme into operation he needed some ready cash. Vasquez had about three hundred pounds on him, to which he helped himself, and he reckoned if he left the pictures where they were he'd be able to raise some money on them, probably from Cunningham, who was always open to a good bargain.

"He didn't know where Vasquez had intended to dispose of them. In Vasquez's pocket he also found a bunch of keys, one of which was labelled with the address of his apartment in Andover Street, and that gave him the idea. So he did no more than pack the body into Josh Ellis's car and drive over there. The Carnival was closed for the night by then, so it was no longer under supervision, and he got away without anyone seeing him. He reckoned that when we found the body in Andover Street it would put us off the scent for at least twenty-four hours, if it didn't take us in altogether.

"He then drove himself home and parked the car in his own garage. Josh had been expecting him to use it for carting away the pictures, so he wouldn't be worried about it for a while. After that he got some sleep, though not very much, and spent the rest of the day clearing up his affairs. He called on Cunningham and offered him the pictures without going into all the gruesome details. Cunningham guessed he was up to something and took the opportunity of baiting him down to a much lower figure than he would normally have paid. Siegman needed the money and couldn't very well argue, especially as Cunningham offered to pay him in advance and collect the pictures late that evening. Siegman intended to turn up here once more, just to make everything look all right. He visited his wife in the afternoon and arrived here at about six o'clock, when he went straight down to the vault to pack up the pictures ready for Cunningham to collect. But just as he was bringing them through into the cellar he heard some one coming down."

"That must have been me," Christina said faintly. "I was on my way to call on you, Mr Connolly, and I found the side-door of the club open, so I came in to see if everything was all right."

"He didn't know it was you," Flash said. "He thought it was probably Mike, or Mr Fitzroberts. He hadn't time to do

anything but hide, and he nipped round to the back of the cellar, leaving the ventilator open. He thought whoever it was would do a bit of investigating, and that would be his chance. The moment you'd climbed through, back he came and shut you in, and then went upstairs and was there as usual when the rest of the staff arrived. He told me he was in a terrible state when you failed to turn up and he realized what he'd done, but it was too late for him to let you out without being caught. He was just trying to figure it all out when I turned up, and that put the tin hat on it.

"When the message came through from the Yard about Mrs Schutte wanting me to call and see her he was listening in at the switchboard, and he guessed she was about to blow the whole thing to glory. He worked quickly after that. First he picked a quarrel with you, Mike, and gave notice. When he got the cash from Cunningham in the afternoon Siegman had handed over the other half of the cloakroom ticket that he later fixed to the parcel, leaving the latter in Ramon's care. All he had to do then was to walk out and settle accounts with Mrs Schutte. He was pretty sure we'd have the peepers on her apartment, so on the way he knocked a taxi-driver on the head, took his hat and coat and pitched him out, and drove round to Camborne Street. She was expecting us to call, so he got in the front door all right, and when she opened the door of her flat he let her have it. But he was in too much of a hurry that time, and didn't notice that as he brought out his iron cosh, the pad of cloakroom tickets he'd been carrying around in his pocket came out too. All he could think of was to get away as fast as possible, which he did, driving off towards home in the taxi, and leaving it, with the driver's outfit inside, just off the Bayswater Road. Then he took a bus to Notting Hill, and that was where we picked him up.

"He was getting his things together in a hurry, intending to drive himself out of town in Josh Ellis's car, abandon it, and put up somewhere for the rest of the night, until he could get his plane in the morning. God knows how he hoped to get away with it, but when a man's mind is in a state like that he doesn't think very clearly. He went to pieces

after we started to question him, and let us have the whole story. His main concern seemed to be about Miss Page. He knew she wouldn't be able to get out through the other door, because in the ordinary way Josh kept it bolted on his side. He had some idea of sending you a message, Mike, at the last minute, telling you how to get her out. But we saved him the trouble. I rang through for a couple of men to go down and pick up Josh and to get Miss Page out that way. But Mr Fitzroberts had started a fight that might have been going on now if we hadn't arrived with reinforcements, and I found my two men lying on the ground unconscious."

There followed a long silence after he had finished speaking. Christina lay back upon the sofa, staring at the ceiling. Sling lighted a fresh cigarette and absently poured himself a drink. Mrs Connolly sat and stared reproachfully at the three men in turn, as if they had deliberately conspired against her. Michael got to his feet, suddenly ferocious.

"I'll prosecute," he said. "That's what I'll do. I'll prosecute the lot of them. Daring to come here and abuse my hospitality. Daring to use my club. . . ."

"You can leave all that to us," Flash said, with supreme weariness. "We've got as water-tight a case as any I've seen. And you forget that three of them are dead."

"And so they should be. I'll take the witness stand against them. By all the holy saints, they shan't go unpunished. Frank, I'd like to shake you by the hand."

Which he did, to the detective's embarrassment. Sling said, "I thought you didn't want any publicity, Mike?"

"Did I ever say that?"

"You certainly mentioned it, unless I'm losing my mind."

"The devil I care, boy. What's a little publicity to a man like me?"

"Nothing, if you've ceased to value the patronage of Colonel Forthright-hardye, his wife, daughter, and all their friends and relatives."

"Let them go hang themselves from the nearest tree," Michael said. "I never could abide the man. He's the manners of a pig and is an abominable bore into the bargain. It's happy I'll be not having to listen to him."

Flash rose, stifling a yawn. He said, "I'll be getting along now, before I fall asleep on my feet. Hope you feel better in the morning, Miss Page. Good night to you all. I'll see you to-morrow, Mike. Cheerio. I can let myself out."

He left them, and Mrs Connolly said, "What a disrupting influence that man is. I always *knew* he wouldn't do the club any good. Miss Page, I think you'd better stay the night with us. You must be feeling dreadful, after such frightening experiences. And you can have one of the spare rooms."

"It's very nice of you, Mrs Connolly." She sat up and put her feet to the ground. "But really, I couldn't trouble you. I'll be quite all right going home, and I've all my own things there."

"Perhaps you're right. Send her home in a cab, Michael. And see that everything's shut up, won't you. I shall go straight upstairs now. I'm simply dying of fatigue. Good night, Miss Page, and don't think of coming in until your foot is better. So very painful. I remember I suffered *agony* when I strained my wrist."

In silence Sling opened the door for her and followed her out. Michael said, "Are you sure you won't stay, Miss Page? It's a brave girl you've been, and I shouldn't like to think——"

"I'm perfectly all right, really." She got up and moved to the table, a trifle unsteadily, and collected her handbag, to which she had clung, with feminine determination, throughout the evening. Sling came back then, wearing his coat. He said, "I'll see Miss Page home."

Michael regarded him dubiously. "I was just going to ring for a taxi," he began.

"I've got one waiting. I can easily drop her off on the way home. There's not much point in us having a taxi each and riding one behind the other."

"You needn't bother." She avoided looking at him, and was busy testing her foot, while Michael supported her by the arm. "I can manage all right."

"I can manage better," Sling said, and lifted her in his arms. "Will you lock up, Mike, and I'll give you a ring in the morning. Cheerio."

And he carried her out, leaving Michael to stare after them speechlessly.

CHAPTER XX

JUST over a week later Michael was pleased to find, on arriving down earlier than usual, that Miss Page had returned to work. Her foot, she told him upon inquiry, was quite well now. She was feeling a lot better for the rest. She seemed a little nervous, but that was only natural in the circumstances. Smiling cheerfully to himself, for he had missed her about the place, he went into his office, to find Sling lounging in a chair, a cigarette between his fingers. Michael said in surprise:

"You're early, aren't you?"

"I am that. I'm turning over the proverbial new leaf, Mike, and to celebrate I thought we might have a drink."

Reluctantly Michael unlocked the cupboard and brought out his cherished brandy.

"I don't know why you can't get one at the bar," he said.

"I've got used to yours, and it's spoilt me for any other."

Michael poured out two measures and pushed one across to him.

"Miss Page is back," he said.

"I know." Sling drank, put down the glass, and looked at Michael thoughtfully. "What would you say if I took a few days off and flew over to Paris?"

"What would I say?" The older man frowned. "What d'you expect me to say? It wouldn't do any good if I said no, would it? You'd go just the same. And I guess you've earned a holiday. We can manage all right. There's a new chap coming in to-morrow to look after the cloakroom, a decent, respectable fellow this time, I've made sure of that. And Miss Page will be here——"

"I'm taking her with me," Sling said.

"What?" Michael leapt to his feet, bringing his fist down with a crash upon the desk. "That dear, sweet, innocent girl? Oh no, you're not, boy. Not while I've the strength to stop you. The very idea. . . ."

"You can cast anchor again," Sling said. "We got married this morning."

Michael stood there, arms hanging limply, staring down at him, then collapsed into his chair. He said, "I don't believe it. I don't believe you'd marry anyone, or that anyone would marry you. Where's the certificate?"

"Chris has it. The old cove at the registry office didn't trust me."

"Neither do I. And neither will she, if she's got any sense. But has she? Women do such damn' silly things."

Mrs Connolly came in, immaculate as ever, exuding coolness and efficiency. She bestowed upon Sling a smile of singular sweetness. She said, "Good evening, my dear. How are you? I declare you're looking more civilized already. A woman can have such an excellent influence on a man, providing he isn't too utterly hopeless. And dear Christina is such a sweet girl. Has he told you, Michael?"

"Are you in this too?" He glared at her accusingly. "What is it, a conspiracy? If they wanted to get married, why not tell me? Why am I always left out of everything?"

"There, darling." She came across to sit on the arm of his chair, and stroked his hand. "Don't upset yourself. You've had *such* a lot to contend with lately that I thought it best to break the news to you gently. And you always get *so* excited at weddings and funerals. But there's no reason why we shouldn't have a little celebration to-night. In fact, I've invited a few friends along. Only the best people, of course. I thought we'd keep it all very quiet."

"You've kept it quiet all right," Michael said. Then, in a more reasonable tone, "I thought you two kids never met without fighting like cats."

"What's wrong with that?" Sling said. "Cats have a lovely time."

Absently Michael fondled his wife's hand, and over another brandy his thoughts took a mellow and reminiscent trend. He said at last, "Take her to Paris if you've set your heart on it. But don't stay away long." And he added anxiously, "She'll be coming back here, won't she?"

"Of course, darling," Mrs Connolly said. "I told her we couldn't possibly get along without her now. Well, the time is simply rushing by and I've a lot to do. Come and help me,

Sling, there's a good boy. And Michael, will you get up some of the special champagne, dear, as it's quite an occasion?"

He said he would, and added, "Ask Miss Page to come and see me."

"Mrs Fitzroberts," Sling reminded him, and opened the door for Mrs Connolly to make her victorious exit.

Michael had picked up a pen and was writing busily when Christina entered. He said, "Sit down, Miss Page. I mean, Mrs Fitzroberts." And seeing her smile, "Well, Christina, then. And you'd better call me Michael. You're practically one of the family now."

"Yes," she said, "I suppose I am."

They sat and looked at each other. He said, "Why didn't you tell me, my dear? I'd have liked to have come along."

"I'm sorry. I would have waited, but you know what Sling is like when he's made up his mind. And your wife said——"

"I know." He sighed, then brightened considerably. "Well, we'll be having a party to-night, anyway. Here, have a wedding present."

He pushed a cheque across to her, and she picked it up and looked at it in astonishment. He insisted, "Go on and have it. You don't get married every day—or you shouldn't." And, brushing any protest aside, he rose and took her hand. "I hope you'll be very happy, my dear. Run along now and see if you can help some one—you know what I mean. I've got to go down and get some champagne. This is going to be quite an evening."

"You're very kind," she said. "Thank you, Micky," and went quickly from the room.

He sat down heavily and reached for his glass. He murmured, "She called me Micky," and a tear ran slowly down his cheek.

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